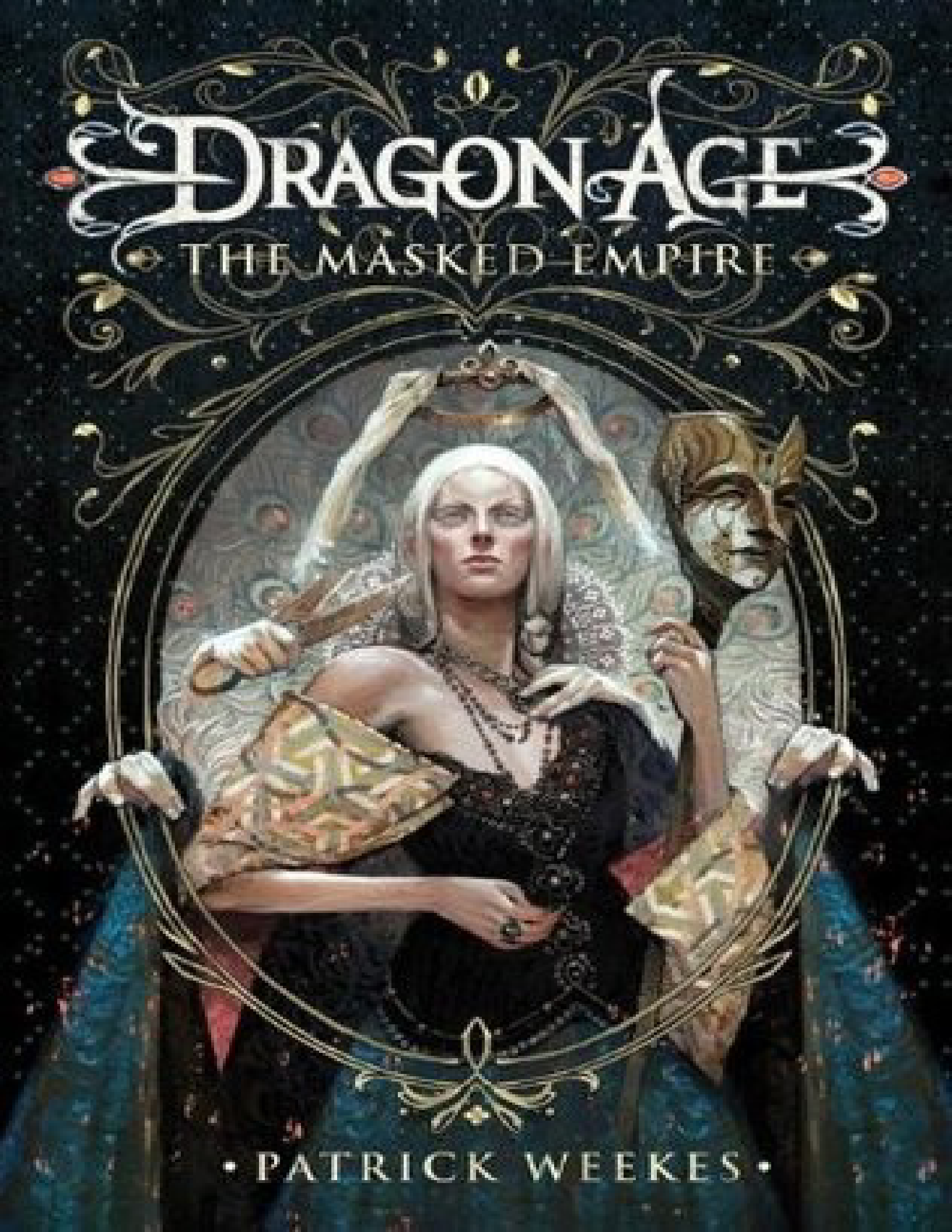
DRAGON AGE

THE MASKED EMPIRE



PATRICK WEEKES

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DRAGON AGE™

THE MASKED EMPIRE

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
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This book is dedicated to the LGBTQ fans who have talked to all of us at BioWare via panel questions, direct messages, Tumblr fan art, excited YouTube videos, and everything else. Thank you for your kind words and your heartwarming—sometimes heartbreaking—stories. Thank you for appreciating what we have done and challenging us to do more. But mostly, thank you for reaching out and making your voices heard.

Acknowledgments

No book tied to a world this large happens without a lot of people making sure that it all comes together. This book in particular required even more work from more people, given a health scare that resulted in me going through eye surgery in the middle of the rough draft.

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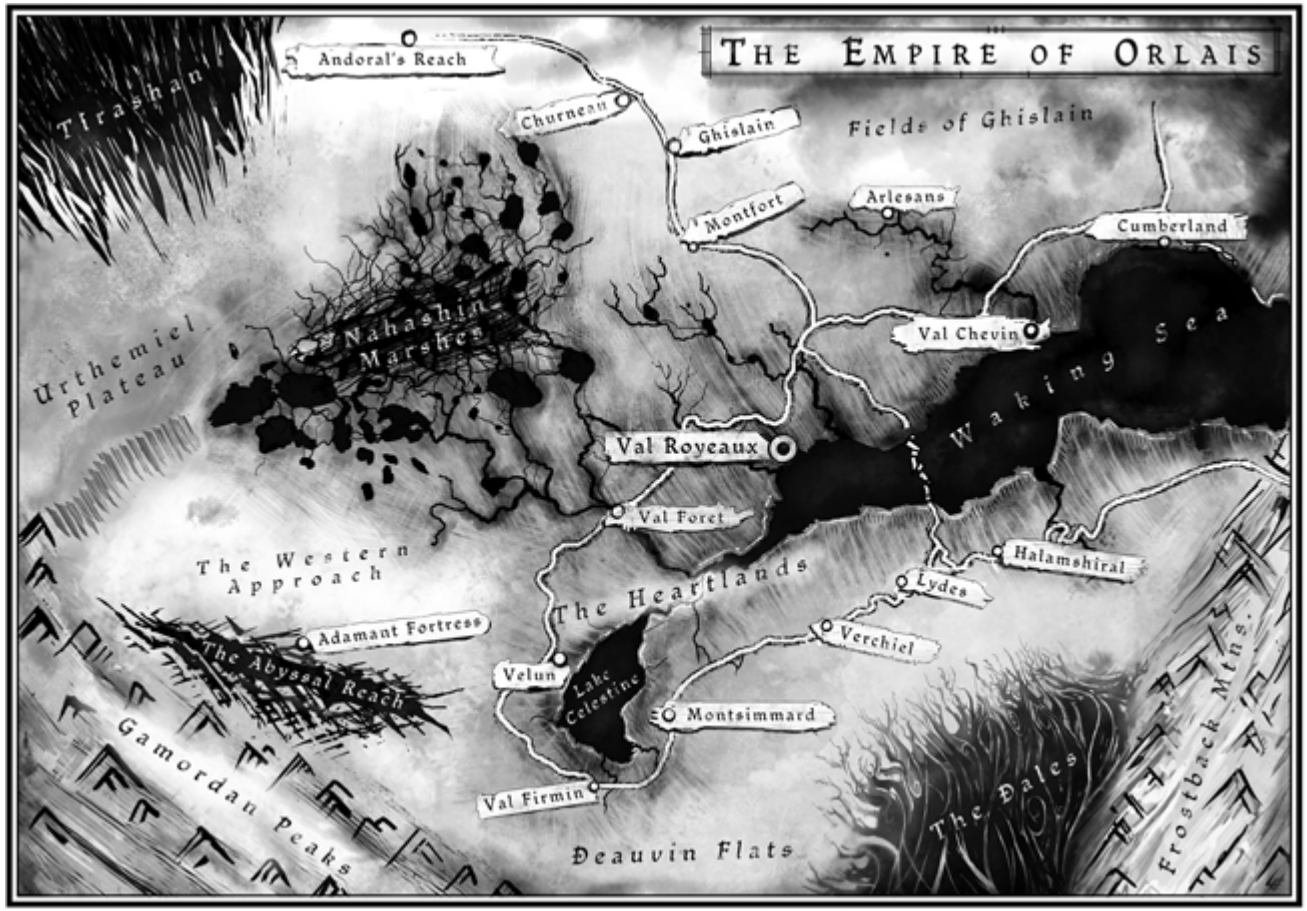
The Empire of Orlais
Andoral's Reach
Tirashan
Churneau
Ghislain
Fields of Ghislain
Montfort
Arlesans
Cumberland
Nahashin Marshes
Urthemiel Plateau
Val Chevin
Waking Sea
Val Royeaux
Val Foret
The Western Approach
The Heartlands
Halamshiral
Lydes
Adamant Fortress
The Abyssal Reach
Verchiel
Velun
Lake Celestine
Montsimmard
Gamordan Peaks
Val Firmin
Deauvin Flats
The Dales
Frostback Mtns.

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1

Empress Celene strode into the University of Orlais's great Chantry Courtyard surrounded by her entourage of servants and guards and flanked by Ser Michel, her champion. The entire faculty had been assembled to greet her, and the professors bowed at her approach.

In the wan morning light, the marble walls glittered like fresh-fallen snow. The stone tiles of the courtyard had been set with a mosaic of Andraste, proud and defiant in her mother-of-pearl armor with carnelian flames behind her. Celene noted with approval that the mosaic had been restored since her last visit, where she had seen that time and careless boots had knocked some of the stones loose.

The mosaic of Andraste stared with lapis lazuli eyes at the chantry that gave the courtyard its name. It was the tallest building in the university, displaying its dominance with a pair of shining bronze domes that the university students jokingly called "the bosom of Andraste."

Not that the university chancelier had mentioned that to Celene, of course.

Over the great bronze doors, over a mural of Andraste and her disciples, a phrase from the Chant of Light had been set into the stone in gold: A LEARNED CHILD IS A BLESSING UPON HIS PARENTS AND UNTO THE MAKER. The university chancelier and his professors stood with heads bowed beneath the phrase as Celene and her entourage made their way across the mosaic of Andraste.

“Your Imperial Majesty,” Chancelier Henri Morrac said, and at a gesture from Celene, he and the other professors rose from their bows. “We are honored by your visit.”

“In such troubled times, Morrac, I find myself taking comfort in the knowledge and wisdom you and your university provide the future of Orlais.” Celene smiled and gestured to her attendants, and two of them produced a jumble of intricately wrought silverite that, with a few twists and turns, could ingeniously be shaped into a small but surprisingly comfortable bench.

Ser Michel stepped aside, his eyes taking in the walkways and windows set into the marble walls, alert for any threat to the empress but always projecting the air of confidence Celene required in those who served her personally.

Morrac started. He had clearly expected to invite her into his office, to discuss the reason for Celene’s visit in his place of authority and perhaps show off a new manuscript some promising student had uncovered. Beneath the comparatively simple mask he wore as a younger son of the Morrac family, his lips pursed in confusion and concern as he took a moment to reposition his approach to the conversation for an outdoor setting. Celene was quietly pleased to have him off balance so early.

The empress wore a creamy satin gown trimmed with ropy strands of pearls and woven with intricate patterns of gold set with amethyst to mark the colors of the Valmont family. Her position as empress dictated that this was the lightest and most comfortable gown she could wear in public except when she went riding, but it nevertheless weighed enough to crush her back and waist by the end of the day. She settled onto the small silverite bench, careful as always that no sign of relief or discomfort betrayed her.

She was aided in hiding her expression by the half-mask that all Orlesian nobles wore in public. It was inlaid with moonstone, and lines of gold suggested cheekbones and a nose. Tiny purple sapphires ringed her eyes, and dyed peacock feathers swept back from her head to ring her with a crown of gold and violet. The sapphires and feathers could be replaced with

other colors to match a particular gown or represent a special occasion. Below the mask, the empress's face was powdered white and her lips were lined with deep red.

"If Your Imperial Majesty wishes," Chancelier Morrac began, "Professor Doucy would be pleased to give a reading from his dissertation on the inferiority of Qunari society. It is a bold attempt to expand upon Brother Genitivi's earlier writings, and if I recall correctly, you found his earlier work quite promising."

"That does indeed sound lovely," Celene said, and waited until Morrac had half turned to one of the professors on his right before adding, "but I find discussion of the great horned rulers of Par Vollen somewhat stark on a day already beset by the promise of winter's chill." As he jerked back to attention, she added, "Perhaps one of your professors could entertain us with a study of mathematics. I have, in my own simple way, been struggling with Vyranion's Theorem, and I would be quite grateful if one of your learned scholars could explain the process by which it is proven."

For a moment, the great courtyard was silent but for a few birds which, fed by students or groundskeepers, had elected not to fly south for the winter.

Chancelier Morrac swallowed. Even as a younger son, he should have had better composure. Celene wondered idly whether his open expression had led his family to banish him from the dangers of the imperial court to the scholarly life, or if he had forgotten his courtly training since coming to the university. In either case, it spoke ill of him.

"Your Radiance," he said finally, "you think too little of your own scholarly pursuits. Vyranion's Theorem is exceedingly complex. I confess, in my own mathematical studies, the waves of my intellect have broken upon its rocky shores with little result. However, if you seek a mathematical demonstration, I have devised a treatise upon a specific ratio found in nature so often that it must reflect the Maker's own hand. I would be honored to—"

“Tea?” Celene asked, and gestured to one of her attendants, who produced an elegant silver pot inscribed with runes that kept the water within hot with no need for a fire. Another servant drew forth cups and saucers of Antivan porcelain so fine that the morning sun shone through them. “Surely one of the other professors has mastered Vyranion’s Theorem. The University of Orlais can hardly be the most learned institution in Thedas if we cannot understand the work of a simple Tevinter scholar.”

Chancelier Morrac looked affronted at that. Perhaps the man had not totally lost his noble pride after all. “I assure you, Your Radiance, the University of Orlais is unparalleled in its pursuit of knowledge and culture, due in no small part to the fact that Tevinter scholars are but slaves to the mages who rule them. In granting us freedom from pressures religious or political, you have empowered us to further Orlais’s culture.”

Yes, Morrac still remembered enough courtly training to throw the occasional barb. Celene was pleased to see that the conversation might be interesting after all. “One of your students, then? When I went riding with Comtess Helene last year, she told me that she was sponsoring a young man whose mathematical abilities were nothing short of prodigious.” She took the teacup her servant offered and took a small sip. “Now that I think upon it, *he* was studying Vyranion’s Theorem, and the discussion led me to peruse it myself. Lennan, I believe, was the young man’s name.”

“Ah, yes,” said Morrac, his gaze going flinty as he saw where Celene was headed, “I think I remember his application. And while of course our doors are open to any who, through noble blood or proper sponsorship, are able to ensure that they will continue our distinguished traditions—”

“Tell me, Morrac,” Celene said, and paused to sip her tea. “You study mathematics. Are you familiar with the number zero?”

It was excellent tea, a Rivaini blend of cinnamon, ginger, and cloves, sweetened with honey just as Celene liked.

“Yes, Your Radiance,” Morrac said after a moment of silence, when it became clear that the question was not rhetorical. He took the teacup

Celene's servant offered him with scarcely concealed irritation.

"Excellent. That is the number of students at your university who do not come from noble blood. I confess to some disappointment in that matter, Chancelier Morrac, as I had hoped to see some improvement since our last talk."

"Your Radiance—"

"Drink your tea, Morrac. I have not asked you to let peasants scurry through your halls. I have asked you to admit commoners who obtain sponsorship from a noble who recognizes in them some intelligence that transcends blood and offers a chance for Orlais to become greater through their studies."

Morrac's knuckles were white on the saucer he held. "The young man you spoke of, Your Imperial Majesty, was an elf."

Celene turned to her champion, Ser Michel de Chevin, who was regal in silverite armor enameled with the imperial coat of arms. His own family's coat of arms was inset just above his heart, while his mask was a simpler reflection of Celene's own. "Ser Michel, I believe the chevaliers are renowned for their keen eyes. Tell me, is there not an elf already present with us in the courtyard?"

Ser Michel smiled slightly. "In a manner of speaking, Majesty." He pointed at the chantry, specifically the mural over the great bronze doors. "If I am not mistaken, that mural is a faithful reproduction of Andraste and her disciples by the legendary Henri de Lydes. At the time Henri created the original, the elves were still considered allies, as they had not yet attacked and betrayed Orlais. Twenty years later, when Divine Renata called for an Exalted March against the elves, she also ordered the destruction of all Chantry art that included elves." He smiled. "But Henri de Lydes pleaded with such grace and passion that she relented and allowed this single piece to survive, provided that Henri cropped the ears of the now-heretical disciple Shartan."

Celene inclined her head gratefully. "Ah, yes. And it seems the university has copied the original piece quite faithfully. Can you point out

Shartan, Morrac? The ears have been altered, but the large eyes make it quite clear."

Morrac looked at the mural, then back at Celene. "Of course, Your Radiance. Unlike the Chantry, the university prides itself on creating an accurate vision of history. That is indeed the elf whom Andraste freed from servitude to the vile Tevinter Imperium."

"How strange that the university, so eager to fight against *pressures religious* to limit its field of studies, would in this matter be unwilling to bend even as far as Divine Renata herself."

"It is a puzzle, Majesty," Ser Michel said, and looked over at Chancelier Morrac.

The chancelier took a long sip from the teacup, then set it back in its saucer, the porcelain clinking as his cup rattled. "We would of course be honored to review Comtess Helene's application again."

"Orlais honors your commitment to our culture and scholarship." Celene inclined her head and stood. One attendant took the small silverite bench and collapsed it behind her, and Celene handed her cup and saucer to another. "Now, after this talk of matters religious, I believe I would like to spend a moment appreciating the lessons this chantry can teach. See that I am not disturbed, Chancelier Morrac." Then she smiled, and as a peace offering, added, "When I am done, I would indeed be interested in hearing more about this ratio you say shows the hand of the Maker."

The professors bowed and hurriedly stood aside as Celene approached the great bronze doors. Celene's own servants held back as well, save Ser Michel.

"You might have informed me of the turn you expected the conversation to take, Majesty," he murmured. "The Heresy of Shartan is not precisely common knowledge."

Celene smiled without looking his way. "I had faith in you, my champion."

"Shall I accompany you inside?"

“I believe I will be safe enough in the bosom of Andraste,” Celene said as Ser Michel pulled the door open. Michel looked inside, taking in the room and assessing any potential dangers, then turned to her and nodded, and she walked in alone.

The air was cool inside, though without the chill of the autumn wind, it was more comfortable than it had been outside. The stained-glass windows cast beams of crimson light across wooden benches whose oiled scent filled the chantry. At the far end of the hall, the eternal flame burned brightly in a great golden brazier, the only other light beyond the windows.

The chantry was empty save for a red-haired woman in a lay sister’s robes, who rose to her feet as Celene came forward. “Your Imperial Majesty,” she murmured, bowing deeply.

Sparring with Chancelier Morrac over the elves had been a gentle prelude to the real test of the morning. Celene gestured for the woman before her to rise. “I am glad the Divine was willing to meet.”

The red-haired woman smiled. She was unmasked, as those who served the Chantry most often were, and while she spoke with a native Orlesian accent, her features were Fereldan. The masks were part of the Game, the ruthless and endless contest by which dynasties were founded and lost in Orlais, and the Chantry’s insistence that their people go unmasked was meant to suggest that they were beyond politics. It was a suggestion that few in Orlesian nobility took seriously. “The matter at hand is, as your messenger said, quite serious, and the Divine would like to see it resolved. I am her voice in this regard. You may call me Nightingale.”

Beneath her mask, Celene raised an eyebrow. The Empress of Orlais was rarely asked to address someone by a pseudonym. Still, Justinia would only have sent someone she truly trusted.

Without ceremony, Celene sat down on one of the benches, her creamy satin gown bunching awkwardly and amethysts jangling against the wood. “You are familiar, *Nightingale*, with the tension between the templars and the mages?” When Nightingale hesitated, Celene waved for the other woman to sit as well.

“Of course, Your Radiance.” Nightingale sat, moving with a casual grace and coming to rest with her simple robes unwrinkled and unbunched. The subtle series of movements was the mark of a trained bard, and Celene filed the observation away for use as needed.

“The templars have become even more restless since what happened in Kirkwall,” Celene said, staring at the brilliant red light of the stained-glass depiction of Andraste on the pyre. Years of training let her see the woman beside her clearly at the edge of her vision. “As have the mages, for that matter. What does Dorothea intend to do?”

She had used Divine Justinia’s given name deliberately, and saw, from the corner of her eye, as Nightingale reacted. The woman’s eyes narrowed a tiny fraction, while her posture remained unchanged. Anger, then, but no insulted propriety. Nightingale might call the Divine by her given name, might well have known her before she rose to the position.

All this passed in a heartbeat as Nightingale said, “The Divine does not wish to assume that what transpired in Kirkwall was anything more than the actions of a single mad mage driven to tragic action by overzealous templars. You know that in some Marcher city-states, mages face more restrictions than they do in Orlais.”

“I do,” Celene said, “and I also know that you have not answered my question. If Dorothea proposes to do nothing to unite the templars and the mages, she is following in the footsteps of Grand Cleric Elthina, who waited and prayed while Kirkwall tore itself apart.” She turned and faced Nightingale directly.

The other woman had reacted again at the use of the Divine’s given name. “*Justinia* wishes to see this world made better, Your Radiance. We gain nothing by acting capriciously.”

“Sometimes events do not allow us the time we wish, especially when magic is at play.” Celene looked at Nightingale, who sat as a proper lady, relaxed and poised in her simple robes, and made a guess. “I understand that during the last Blight, the Circle tower in Ferelden was nearly lost when one of their senior mages became an abomination. After killing the

creatures, the Hero of Ferelden was forced to decide on the spot whether to kill every remaining mage in the tower."

Her barb struck home, as Nightingale blinked, then said with heat, "We are hardly in the thick of battle, Your Radiance."

"We are always in battle," Celene said. "It is only that some of us do not always realize it. A bard named Marjolaine once told me that. I heard she met an unfortunate end in Ferelden." She sighed. "Isn't that sad, Nightingale?"

Nightingale paused for a moment, looking at Celene with cautious respect. "I suppose," she finally said, "it is a matter of perspective. And perhaps you might call me Leliana."

"Perhaps I might," Celene said, and smiled before lowering her voice and continuing. "Divine Justinia must know this: I have nobles begging in private salons for the throne to take direct action in this matter." At Leliana's shocked look, she nodded. "There are men of Orlais who would sooner see us march upon our own people in the name of safety. I would despise that. Dorothea knows that I would. But I must offer them some alternative."

Leliana stood, frowning in thought. "You wish the Divine to make some overt show of ameliorating the situation."

Celene let out a breath. "In truth, any overt show will bring complaints that I have allowed the Chantry free rein to rule this empire for me," she said, and Leliana nodded wordlessly. "But if Justinia can calm tempers before I am forced to turn the blade of the empire upon itself, then I will pay such a price willingly."

Leliana smiled. "You think less for yourself and more for Orlais than I had expected, Your Radiance. It is a fortunate quality in a ruler, and one I have not seen enough."

Celene stood as well, and for a moment her gown was bathed in the crimson light of the stained glass. "Tell me something. How large was the Archdemon?"

Leliana laughed the delicate cultured laugh of a noblewoman or trained bard. The effect made her sister's robes look like a poor disguise. "Large enough, Your Radiance, that after having seen it, most problems seem small by comparison." Her face turned serious, and she added, "I will ask Justinia to consider acting directly. She will want your support, to head off accusations that she might be attempting to steal power for herself."

"Of course. Perhaps if she made a statement at a ball thrown in her honor?"

Leliana considered it. "It is not the place where one would expect her to make such a pronouncement…"

"Which is why you like the idea," Celene said, smiling. "It will also ensure that many of the nobles petitioning me for action will have little choice but to hear her words and know that the matter is being attended to."

Leliana grinned. "You were trained as a bard as well, Your Radiance. It is easy to forget. I shall take the proposal to the Divine."

"Three weeks," Celene said, "or at most, a month. Any longer, and I will have no choice but to act. The nobles will want some sign of resolution before they retire to their winter homes."

Leliana bowed. "Your Imperial Majesty."

The Divine's spy left through a hidden side door, and Celene sat back down on the bench. This time, mindful of her training, she sat without making a sound or wrinkling her gown in the slightest.

Three more weeks of gritting her teeth and dealing with Grand Duke Gaspard, who agitated with the other nobles in an attempt to start a war. Three weeks of trying to ignore the idiotic arguments started by thuggish templars and mages who refused to see the way of the world.

And her reward for perseverance would be Gaspard bellowing that she had let the Chantry have more power, as though power was a sword only one person could hold at a time. It was not. Power was a dance to be navigated with partners, knowing when to lead, when to follow, and when simply stepping on the hem of a rival's gown could send her to the ground in shame.

In careless hands, such power could bring down the greatest empire in Thedas. The culture and history of all of Orlais was Celene's to protect.

It was at times like these that she enjoyed the simple pleasure of bending a recalcitrant professor to her will. "Three weeks," Celene said, and allowed herself a moment to watch the fiery light play through the stained glass.

* * *

The half-masks that the nobility wore in public were always mirrored by the masks of their servants, albeit less extravagantly, and with less variation than the nobles, who could often afford different masks as the needs of fashion dictated. If a lord's house mask was a lion carved from ivory and inlaid with onyx and gold, his servants' masks would be lions as well, painted black and lined with brass. The masks protected the servants when they were about, warning tradesmen and merchants that any offense given to the servant was potentially an offense to the servant's master. To servants of other houses, the masks were a way to instantly recognize a potential ally … or a potential enemy.

The masks worn in the royal palace at Val Royeaux by servants who were to be seen in public mirrored the one worn by Empress Celene. Where hers was inlaid with moonstone, theirs were simply enameled, or inlaid with ivory for the highest-ranking servants, and the gold and violet were simply painted on. Below the half-masks, the servants of Val Royeaux painted their faces white, a mark of additional status.

To a visitor, looking at a sea of pale faces trimmed with gold and violet, the servants were almost identical. The women wore serving dresses, the men tight breeches, both cut in the latest fashion and dyed in the royal colors. Only the guards and the servants who were never meant to be seen —the cook and her assistants, for example, or the laborers who cleaned the privy—had their faces visible.

But the goal for the half-masks that every servant wore was pageantry, not anonymity. Otherwise, the mask would have covered Briala's elven ears.

“You, there! Rabbit!” called the chatelaine as Briala passed the great hall.

Briala turned. “Mistress?”

“Turned you out, did they?” The chatelaine looked back to the great hall, where servants on ladders were adjusting a great purple banner so that the golden lion of Empress Celene’s House Valmont would hang at the proper height. “It may be acceptable to have you dress Her Imperial Majesty on a normal day, but for a ball, they’ll want everything proper.” She squinted. “Higher on the left!”

Briala had seen the chatelaine prepare for countless balls before. The woman was always angry and snappish at the time, taking out her anxiety on anyone she could. Today felt different, however. Her barb had little heat behind it, and all the servants knew that Briala got on well with the girls who dressed Celene for the most formal occasions. She had to, lest they become rivals.

What was more, a few stray locks of the chatelaine’s hair had been caught under her mask, a faux pas that was completely unacceptable for any servant in the imperial palace. The chatelaine could not have failed to notice it unless she had removed her mask and then put it back on quickly.

“Yes, mistress,” Briala said. She had been Celene’s handmaid since childhood, when the empress had just been one girl among countless rivals for the throne. Now, in Val Royeaux, Briala was one of the few elves who had been granted the mask of public service.

“Well, you can make yourself useful, then. Run to the kitchen and speak with the cook and her girls. The weather has been dry, and I won’t have the meat go dry along with it.” She turned back to Briala. “Last autumn, Lady Montsimmard said that the *Circle of Magi* served better duck than we did.” She glared, the narrowing of the eyes visible through the slits in her mask. “Tell the girls that if this happens this year, I’ll have them whipped.”

“Yes, mistress,” Briala said again, ducking her head to make her respect clear. The hierarchy among the palace servants was strict and clear, and

while Briala's status as Celene's personal handmaid set her off to one side of the chain of command, she was by no means free of it completely.

"Oh, no need to worry, rabbit." The chatelaine patted Briala familiarly on the shoulder. As she did, Briala saw that the clasp on the other woman's cuff was unfastened, another mistake that the servants who dressed the chatelaine would never have made. "It's just to put the fear of the Maker in the lazy things. We'd never whip *you*. Off with you, now."

"Yes, mistress," Briala said for the third time, and left as the chatelaine began yelling at the servants to lower the left side of the banner.

As she strode down the great hallway, the floors covered with fine Nevarran carpet and the walls lined with classical paintings and curls of swirling stucco, Briala thought.

The chatelaine had served Celene faithfully for more than a decade. She cared deeply about her job, and would never allow herself to be distracted on the day of a ball unless she were somehow compromised. The clasp and the stray hair suggested a new lover who had pressed his or her suit and taken a few moments of the chatelaine's time.

It could have been nothing more than that, of course, but in Val Royeaux, everything was part of the Game, even the clandestine affairs of the more important servants. Briala had grown up watching the Game, and as one of Celene's pieces, she was determined to win.

If Briala assumed the worst, the chatelaine would not knowingly be involved in the matter. An embarrassment to Celene would bring embarrassment to the chatelaine as well, and if, Maker forbid, Celene died or lost power, the chatelaine would doubtless be replaced. If this was something more than an overeager new lover, the chatelaine was a tool, not an active member of whatever plot was unfolding.

The question was *whose* tool.

The heat in the kitchens was stifling, as dishes from all across the known world were prepared. The cook, Rilene, was a heavy, ruddy-faced woman whose thick forearms were burn-scarred from an accident in her youth—if the result of the former chatelaine's thinking that Rilene was becoming

presumptuous could be called an “accident.” Briala liked her, and she did what she could to protect the woman, who was better at making pastries than she was at the intricacies of the Game.

“Miss Bria!” Rilene called out, beaming, as Briala came in. “Does Her Radiance need something to last her until the evening banquet? We’ve some lovely pastries from Lydes.”

“Thank you, Rilene, but no.” She looked at Rilene’s girls, some human but many of them elven, and none of them masked. They were not to be seen by the nobles. “The chatelaine had concerns about the duck. She was … very emphatic.”

Rilene gave her a grateful nod. “I will see to it personally.” She dusted flour off her scarred hands and moved over to a pot, where a roasted dish was simmering in sauce.

“And if you could send one of the girls to find out any last-minute schedule changes the chatelaine has made…?” Briala asked.

“Of course, Miss Bria.” Rilene smiled. “I’ll have her find you.”

“Thank you.”

Briala left the kitchens and made her way around the palace. In the great hall, the chatelaine had finished with the banners and was now yelling her way through the organization of the tables. The elaborate card rooms bordering the hall had each been decorated in the style of a different country, from the great bearskin rugs and golden mabari statuettes of Ferelden to the decadent silks and magical lamps of Tevinter. The balconies offered a view of the great hall, as well as an escape to fresh air outside, where verandas overlooked a hedge maze dotted with sparkling marble fountains.

“You, there! Knife-ear!”

Unlike “rabbit,” which was usually spoken with a friendly condescension that only made Briala grit her teeth a little, “knife-ear” could never be mistaken for anything but an insult. It was what a human might use to address gutter trash that was too lazy to work and too stupid to steal.

The captain of the palace guard did not wear a mask. None of the palace guards did. It would be too easy for an assassin to blend in and get close to the empress while armed and armored. His face displayed the long angles that spoke of noble blood, and beneath his surcoat, emblazoned with the golden lion of House Valmont, his ceremonial breastplate gleamed.

More important to Briala, one of the buckles on his breastplate was askew, and he had the welt from a love bite just below one ear.

“Trying to sneak around and dodge your duties, knife-ear?” he said with a sneer.

“The empress bade me examine the preparations for tonight’s banquet.” Briala did not bow. As the captain of the guard, he was important enough that she should, but Briala had enough power to skirt the rules when she truly wanted to—and at the moment she truly did.

“A pretty story.” He sniffed, and then examined her with new interest. “Though if you’re keen to find some distraction, you’ve a fair enough form that I might ignore those flaps of filth jutting out from your head.” He stepped closer, blocking her view of the garden. “Perhaps I might even hold them like reins.” He smelled of sweat as well as lavender, the chatelaine’s favorite scent.

She stepped back inside. “I doubt the empress would approve.” She turned and left without a backward look, still thinking.

The captain of the guard was carrying on with the chatelaine, and his attentions had clearly been meant to harass her until she left, to distract her from looking down at the hedge maze below … which was why he had moved to block her view. From what Briala remembered, the captain had been brought in recently after his predecessor had died. Before that, the man had served in the military. Briala didn’t know where, but given Grand Duke Gaspard’s popularity with the soldiers …

She knew who and where. All that was left was to find out what.

She hurried down a curving staircase whose marble steps were carpeted with red velvet, but a call from behind stopped her before she reached the doorway leading out to the hedge maze.

“Miss Bria!” Briala turned to see one of the elves who worked in the kitchen hurrying her way. “I was told to find you.”

“Thank you, Disirelle.” Briala smiled at the young woman. “What have you found?”

Disirelle lowered her voice and tugged at her sleeve nervously with thin fingers. “The chatelaine added a bard, Melcendre, to tonight’s guest list.”

Briala nodded. “Thank you. Now, if Rilene can spare you for another moment, may I ask you to find out what the captain of the guards has been doing today?”

“Of course, Miss Bria. Rilene said that I was at your disposal.”

“Good.” Briala turned to the hedge maze. “I will be in there, hunting.”

* * *

Celene had seen the Orlesian chevaliers train. One of their most famous tests, at least among those tests they showed in public, was a series of blades mounted on posts in a great wooden scaffolding. When servants worked at a massive hidden wheel, the blades would spin and slash, attacking anyone who passed with dizzying speed. Brave youths at summer festivals would try to rush through in heavy padded tunics, the blades blunted so that most contestants broke no more than their pride. In real tests, it was said, the blades were sharpened, and the soldier ran the gauntlet unarmored.

That gauntlet was always how Celene imagined the formal banquets.

Fortunately, she did not run this gauntlet alone. Her champion, Ser Michel, was a pace behind her, as always, unarmored so as not to cause a disturbance as Celene navigated the crowd, but carrying his blade nevertheless. His hose were rich golden silk and his doublet was violet suede made from beasts the dwarves raised like cattle. His scabbard was ornamented with an inlaid lion of gold with purple sapphires for the eyes and mane, and while his hands were bare of the rings and bracelets other nobles favored—he would allow nothing to impede his ability to handle a blade—he wore atop his mask the tall yellow feather of the chevaliers.

“Orders, Majesty?” he asked in a voice low enough to carry only to her. Michel usually spoke little at these events, which Celene appreciated. As her champion, he was an extension of her public presence, drawing attention not to himself but to her. He cared little for the Game, but he had good eyes and followed orders. He had been with her for almost ten years, since her last champion had died stopping an assassin.

“Briala passed along what she found?”

“The sword in the bushes? Yes, Majesty.” He kept his voice low and calm, and by his body language, they might have been discussing the lovely wyvern ice sculptures at the refreshment tables.

“Watch the bard, Melcendre. It will begin with her.”

“Hopefully I will not be expected to pass any tests of religious iconography this evening.”

Celene checked a smile. “I will attempt to warn you this time should the need arise.”

As Gaspard’s bard, Melcendre, sang in a lovely voice about the end of summer and lost loves, Celene moved through a field of allies and enemies, well wishers and would-be rivals.

“Your Radiance.” Comte Chantral of Velun bowed at her eye contact, the motion making the string of black pearls attached to his nacre mask rattle. “Your light will keep the birds from departing this autumn, for they will think the summer lingers.” Chantral had been pressing for her hand in marriage for some time now. Given his apparent loyalty and clumsiness in the Game, Celene kept him at a comfortable and friendly distance without ever completely dashing his hopes.

Celene’s ivory gown was cut low, and against her pale skin a yellow diamond glittered in a rich golden setting. The gown complemented the great jewel, as teardrops of amber flowed from her bosom in ribbons of yellow that darkened to gold at the hem and wrists. Her mask was identical to the one she’d worn that morning, save that the feathers had been switched to gold filigree.

“Your kindness is as soothing as the warm waters of Lake Celestine,” she said, “and though I fear the birds must depart or die in the winter chill, I know they will grace the skies of Velun come springtime.”

She moved on and caught the eye of Lady Montsimmard, whose mask was set with glowing lyrium crystals on each cheek, a gift from the First Enchanter in the Orlesian Circle. “Cosinne,” she said with friendly familiarity as the other woman gave a deep curtsy. “It has been too long. Tell me, how did you enjoy the duck?”

“The sauce was divine, Your Radiance.” Lady Montsimmard and her husband had entertained Grand Duke Gaspard during the summer, and in past years had held out the family’s proximity to, and control of, the Circle as a bargaining chip. Celene found the husband dangerous and the wife dull, and suspected that Lady Montsimmard did not realize how precarious the situation with the mages had become. Her guess proved true as Lady Montsimmard added, “Though in truth, when we visited the Circle of Magi __”

“Oh, I should have a care when dining with them,” Celene cut in with a light laugh. “It seems that when they try to prepare a meal, everything around them ends up burned.” She moved on as Lady Montsimmard stammered out her farewell with a strained smile. Behind her, Celene knew without looking that Ser Michel had fixed Lady Montsimmard with a disapproving stare, a wordless reminder that Celene could laugh and play the Game, or, if she chose, she could have Lady Montsimmard’s head mounted on a pike. She made a note to speak to Madame de Fer, the Mage of the Imperial Court, about Montsimmard’s familiarity with the mages.

On and on she went through the crowd, trading greetings and kind words laced with poison. Should Orlais push for more advantageous trading terms with Ferelden while the upstart kingdom was still recovering from the Blight? What was to be done to ensure that nothing like Kirkwall could happen here? Was the university where noble sons came to study truly going to start admitting *knife-ears*? Celene’s jaw ached from smiling—it was the clearest expression visible below the half-mask and under the layers

of makeup that covered her face. Beneath the bladed words, Melcendre's beautiful voice continued.

Then, finally, the pageantry ended with the laughter of Grand Duke Gaspard.

It was a deep, booming bellow that had echoed across battlefields. It silenced the timid and the servants like a death knell, and pulled the other lords and ladies into chuckles with its weight.

The crowd before Celene parted, showing a clear path to the grand duke and the dark-haired bard before him. Melcendre was unmasked, though she wore the heavy makeup commoners donned at noble gatherings, and she had turned away in embarrassment at whatever Gaspard had said.

Celene steeled herself without any outward change of expression. She had played the Game for most of her life. No matter how prepared she was, no matter how much she had considered and planned and determined her strategy, there was always one moment of fear.

Then the moment was over, and she was moving toward the bard who had been surreptitiously added to the guest list at the command of a guard captain loyal to Gaspard. Ser Michel's steady footsteps moved in time with hers, the large man matching her pace perfectly.

Melcendre was good, Celene noted, but not perfect. The makeup covered the fact that she could not effect the blush that would signal *actual* embarrassment, but she would have been smarter to add red makeup at the cheeks to give the assembled nobles the impression anyway. Seeing that little imperfection—not even a mistake as such, but a detail that Celene could have done better—somehow made everything seem easier.

"And with what wit has my cousin silenced so sweet a voice?" Celene asked into the expectant silence.

Melcendre paused, uncomfortable, but Gaspard dipped his head, a bow just barely sufficient to avoid undeniable insult. "Your Imperial Majesty," he said, still chuckling, "I was pointing out that the young lady's song had a melody similar to 'King Meghren's Mabari.'"

The assembled nobles tittered, scandalously amused. Celene kept her smile in place. It was a good first strike. The song had been popular and harmless decades ago, during the Orlesian occupation of Ferelden. It told the story of the unhappy Meghren, sent against his will to Ferelden by Emperor Florian. In the song, the hapless noble was comically frustrated at every turn by rough Fereldan culture, including a slobbering mabari hound that ate his mask.

While never forbidden, the song had lost its popularity after King Maric of Ferelden killed Meghren. Since coming to power, Celene had done her best to strengthen ties between the two countries, and the song mocking the crude Fereldans and their uncultured customs had never come back into fashion.

Until now, it seemed.

“I remember singing this with the men during marches,” Gaspard said. “It took us back to the days when Orlais stood poised to conquer the world. Poor Meghren, trapped far from the Maker’s gaze, trying to make himself at home among the dog-lords.” He was a tall man, broad in shoulder, and his doublet and hose were cut with hard lines and silver trim to give the impression of armor. His mask was gold, set with emeralds to match his family’s heraldry, and a tall yellow feather sprouted from the mask—like Ser Michel, he was a member of the chevaliers.

He was also standing not ten paces from Bann Teagan Guerrin, the Fereldan ambassador. The man’s face, bare of makeup, clearly showed his anger at hearing his people called “dog-lords.”

“It was a sad time for all of us,” Celene said, turning to the ambassador with a smile, “and Orlais is pleased to count Ferelden as a friend in these trying times.”

Teagan smiled gratefully and bowed. “Your Imperial Majesty, Ferelden hopes the same.”

“Of course.” Gaspard strode forward. “What’s past is past, eh, Teagan? And now we’re just two old warriors.” He clapped the Fereldan on the shoulder, and Bann Teagan stiffened at the familiarity.

“Did you bring your dog with you to Orlais, my lord?” Melcendre added, the dark-haired bard the very picture of innocence, even as the crowd chuckled.

Teagan turned to her, fists clenched at his sides. “Yes, though not to this ball. I doubt he’d appreciate the food.”

That got a laugh from the crowd. While not a master of the Game, the Fereldan noble was smart enough to see when he was being set up and to try to get the crowd on his side.

“Someday I’ll have to see your dog, Teagan,” Gaspard said, not to be distracted from his play. “But tonight, in celebration of the friendship between our empire and your, ah, kingdom, I brought something for you.” He snapped his fingers, and a servant rushed up carrying a long bundle wrapped in rich green velvet.

Gaspard took the package and handed it to Teagan with a wide smile. Reluctantly, knowing he was stepping into a trap but unable to find a way to avoid doing so, the ambassador unwrapped the package.

Inside, as Briala had informed Celene earlier in the afternoon, was a sword. It was Fereldan in make, largely functional but with a few hints of ornamentation around the hilt and cross guard to suggest that it was the fighting blade of a noble. It was worse for wear, with nicks along the blade and a few spots of rust.

“Grand Duke Gaspard!” Michel moved to put himself between Celene and the sword. The weapon should never have made it into the hall—guards at the palace entrance checked all packages to prevent an assassin from bringing a weapon inside. Which was, Celene reflected, why Gaspard had gone to so much trouble to get the package smuggled in and hidden in the hedge maze earlier that day.

“At ease, chevalier.” Gaspard eyed the blade. “I’d as soon come at someone with a fireplace poker as I would wield that thing.” He nodded to Bann Teagan. “It was taken off the body of some Fereldan noblewoman who got caught making trouble for poor Meghren. Moira, I believe.”

Behind his gold and green mask, his eyes twinkled with good humor. “Our servants had been using it to kill rats in the cellars.”

Teagan had gone still, looking at the sword in his hands as though the rest of the court had vanished. The green velvet bunched around his white-knuckled fists.

“That was a noble’s sword?” Melcendre asked, adding just the right touch of doubt to lure the crowd into laughing at the battered blade and drive Teagan further toward saying something that Gaspard could construe as an insult.

It was a simple play, but an effective one. Bann Teagan would be goaded until he said something in anger. Then Melcendre would gasp in shock, to ensure that even the dimmest nobles understood that they should take offense. Celene would then get to choose between having Ser Michel challenge Bann Teagan to satisfy Orlais’s honor and saying nothing, allowing Gaspard to brandish his chevalier’s code of honor and deliver the challenge himself. Either result would sour relations between Orlais and Ferelden, moving them closer to another foolish war.

War was where Gaspard shone brightest.

All this crossed Celene’s mind, even as Gaspard twisted the knife. “Well, she called herself the Rebel Queen. Closer to being a bandit or a mercenary captain, really. She thought she could drive us out of Ferelden.”

“And she was right,” Teagan said, still not looking at Gaspard. “Her son Maric drove you all out of our kingdom.”

“Shame Moira didn’t live to see it,” Gaspard said, looking around the room with a grin. “Perhaps if she’d had one of your big dogs…”

A few nobles laughed. It was just enough to drive Teagan over the edge. Celene saw his shoulders tense, saw him open his mouth to say exactly what Gaspard had been waiting for.

“Bann Teagan,” she called out. She had ruled the greatest empire in the world for twenty years, and she knew how to send her voice slicing through a crowd to drive it to silence.

Mouth still half open, the Fereldan noble turned to her.

Because she and Gaspard had played the Game for long enough to be old familiar enemies, she gave her cousin a tiny smile before stepping forward. Excellent try, the smile said, and next time, perhaps you will be clever enough to succeed … but not tonight.

“Your Imperial Majesty.” Bann Teagan stood ready, the veins in his neck taut.

“I see from your expression that this blade has awakened old feelings in you. Has Orlais given you offense in the death of Moira Theirin, Rebel Queen of Ferelden?” As the crowd took a collective breath, she added, “Do you demand satisfaction?”

Teagan looked down at the blade in his hands, and then over at Gaspard. And finally, because he might have been lackluster at the Game, but he was not a fool, he looked at Celene herself, judged her stance, and quietly said, “I do.”

As the crowd erupted into yells, Celene smiled. Gaspard closed his eyes and shook his head, already knowing that he had lost, while his bard, Melcendre, looked to him in confusion, clearly uncertain how she was supposed to pull the crowd now.

Celene looked over at Michel and gave a tiny nod, and her champion drew his blade. The yelling of the crowd of nobles went silent at the sight of bared silverite shining blue in the grand ballroom.

“Then satisfaction you shall have,” Celene said to the Fereldan ambassador. “Ser Michel?”

“Your Radiance?” Michel asked, blade drawn, never taking his eyes off Bann Teagan.

“We have been challenged, and you are my champion. Do you stand ready to defend the honor of Orlais in a duel between men of noble birth?”

Without pause, Ser Michel said, “I do not, Your Radiance. Since we are the challenged party, it falls to us to choose the weapons used in this duel. We may not proceed until we do so.”

“Ah.” Celene paused for a moment, letting it build. “I see. I would be loath to stain the still-mending friendship between our two nations with

noble blood shed in defense of past slights." She turned to Bann Teagan. "Thus, as is my right, for the weapons in this duel, I choose … feathers."

"Very good, Your Radiance," Ser Michel said, and without hesitation, he plucked the tall yellow feather from his mask.

The nobles in the crowd were fickle, bloodthirsty, and vain, but above all, they were *hers*. As much as they would have enjoyed the scandal of a bloody duel, they admired a good display of wit. As Ser Michel brought his feather up with the crisp precision of a master swordsman, the nobles burst into delighted laughter.

Bann Teagan visibly relaxed, dropping the velvet-wrapped bundle to his side and giving Celene a relieved smile. "Your Radiance, I regret that I am unarmed for a duel of this nature. You may note that my nation prefers fur to feathers." When he raised his fur-trimmed sleeves, he even got a laugh from the crowd.

"Quite so." Celene looked over at Gaspard, who had assumed the polite smile one used in court to deny one's enemies the satisfaction of a snarl. "Cousin, you have shown your generosity to our cousins in Ferelden with your first gift tonight." She raised a hand and gestured in gratitude. "Would you be so kind as to offer a second?"

Gaspard blinked, then bowed. "Nothing could please me more," he said, and with a quick and controlled gesture, he plucked his own feather from his mask.

Then he handed the yellow feather, the honored symbol of the legendary Orlesian chevaliers, to the Fereldan dog-lord he had just insulted.

As Ser Michel and Bann Teagan thrust and parried with their feathers to the delighted laughter of the crowd, Celene smiled and called for Melcendre to sing something celebratory.

* * *

Briala came to Empress Celene's bedchamber that night through a secret door hidden behind a full-length mirror on one wall.

The empress had bathed after the ball—she often did—and changed into a satin nightgown of rich violet. The candle at her writing desk was barely enough to illuminate the pages she had been reading, and most of the room was lit only by the light coming in from the window—the pale yellow of the autumn moon above, and the warmer orange of Val Royeaux itself below.

“Has he spoken yet?” Celene asked, not turning around from where she sat at her writing desk.

Briala smiled at her empress, whose long blond hair was still touched with damp, catching the moonlight as it streamed down her back. “Yes, though I did not think it worth interrupting your evening. Your former captain of the guards has already confessed to smuggling in Gaspard’s gift, and has thrown himself upon your mercy.”

“What an optimistic decision on his part.” Celene chuckled, put down her pen, and turned to Briala. Celene’s face was, as it had been since childhood, a finer version of her mask—fine bones, porcelain skin, and red lips that naturally curved sweetly. “And the chatelaine?”

Briala hesitated, and Celene offered her a curious smile. Finally, Briala said, “Foolish and infatuated, but not disloyal.” Thinking of Disirelle and Rilene, who might have been whipped had the duck not been satisfactory, she added, “Though some gentle chastisement might ensure that she accepts her newfound disappointment with grace and dignity.”

Celene stood, still smiling. “Of course,” she said as she came forward. “Given our victory tonight over Grand Duke Gaspard, generosity is only appropriate.” Celene’s fingers traced softly on the side of Briala’s neck, and with a tiny rasp, Briala’s mask slid free. “After all, Bria,” she said softly as she set the mask aside, “one must make allowances for mistakes brought on by infatuation.”

Briala smelled roses and honeysuckle as her naked cheek grazed Celene’s, the gentle scents of an empress’s bath, and the satin of the nightgown was cool between Briala’s fingers as it slid away to bare pale

skin. “Whatever you feel best, Your Radiance,” she whispered, and with her free hand, snuffed out the candle.

2

Lemet walked through the torch-lit slums of Halamshiral, keeping an eye out for thieves and humans. He'd heard that in Ferelden, and maybe even in other parts of Orlais, the elves were kept locked up in small sections of the cities called alienages. Here in the Dales, however, there were more elves than humans, and it was the humans who locked themselves away in the High Quarter.

He wondered how the elves in the alienages had it—if being so few in number meant that the humans didn't bother sending guards into the elven streets for nightly beatings of whomever they caught. Perhaps the elves in the alienages had clean streets all throughout their part of the city, not just on the streets that led from the gates to the High Quarter.

But honestly, Lemet doubted it.

"You were a bit of a fool tonight, my friend," said Thren, who was swaying as he walked.

"You don't say." Lemet sighed and stumbled as a loose cobblestone slid in the mud. They were in a neighborhood filled mostly with elven merchants and craftsmen, and the streets hadn't been repaired in years.

"You could be passing an enjoyable evening with Jinette instead of walking home with me," Thren said, "but you had to get her angry."

"Jinette was talking too much," Lemet snapped, and looked around again. "Going on about times centuries past. About the Dales."

“It’s tavern talk, Lemet. Nobody was taking her seriously.” Thren grabbed Lemet’s shoulder, and the two elves stared into an alley, where a trio of youths watched them, hands on their daggers. Thren and Lemet stuck to the far side of the street and didn’t look away until the alley was behind them.

“Jinette thinks too much about history,” Lemet said to break the silence when they were alone again. “It’s going to get her into trouble.”

“How? That tavern was full of elves.” At Lemet’s look, Thren rolled his eyes. “Fine. A few flat-ears, but you know what I mean. You’re going to blame Gestan and Thale because their mothers got friendly with some young noble and popped out a half-blood? It’s not like they get to live in the nice part of town just because they look human. Nobody in there is going to carry tales back to the nobles about the elves talking about back when they ruled this city.”

“I didn’t think they were,” Lemet said, pausing as a young boy ran across the street ahead of them, a shadow in the greasy torchlight. The boy couldn’t have been more than eight. This far past sundown, he had to be working with the thieves. He didn’t look their way. “But talking about it just gets people angry. The young fools hear about the glory of the Dales and the damned *shems* betraying us, and next thing you know, someone decides to do something stupid.”

“Stupid like arguing when the nobles refuse to pay for the repairs to their coaches?” Thren asked, chuckling.

Lemet flushed. “Lord Bencour hasn’t paid for the new axle, and now he wants the front wheels fixed. His man told me he’d pay for all of it once I’d finished.”

“Wouldn’t it have been nice to have been a lord back in the old days?” Thren asked. “Just imagine that. Having your *man* take the coach to some poor human in the slums, telling him you’d pay when you were good and ready?”

“No humans around back then,” Lemet said. “Just elves, the whole city.” He paused. “Do you hear that?”

Thren squinted. “Horses.”

The two moved to the nearest alley. No merchant would be foolish enough to drive a wagon through these streets after dark, and that meant a human in a coach.

Every elf in Halamshiral knew to stay out of sight when the humans rode into the slums.

“You don’t think someone in the tavern talked?” Thren whispered. The clatter of hooves and wheels on cobblestones grew louder.

“I thought it was all elves in there.” Lemet glared at his friend, then looked back down the alley, squinting in the darkness. It was a dead end, blocked by garbage and an outgrown wall where someone had tried to expand their shop.

“Just stay quiet,” Thren muttered, hunkering down behind a crate. Lemet dropped prone, ignoring what he hoped was just mud soaking through his tunic. Together, they waited in silence as the human’s coach came down their street.

It was dazzling as it came into view, freshly painted, white trimmed with gold, and tiny lamps at each side of the driver’s seat drove back the shadows. The driver was a big man with knife sheaths sewn into his leather vests, and armored guards clung to the sides of the coach. Lemet couldn’t see the noble inside—a red velvet curtain hid everything but a golden line of light from the coach’s interior. The horses were identical, with perfect golden coats and white manes.

Then the coach was past them, its loud clattering the only sound in the street, and Lemet let out a silent sigh of relief.

A rock sailed out of the darkness and clanged off the shoulder of one of the guards.

Thren, who had started to get up, dropped back down as the guard swore and rapped sharply on the side of the coach. Lemet squinted. The rock had come from the alley across the street.

After a moment, he picked out the elven boy standing in the shadows with another rock raised. The boy’s face was twisted in anger, and his other

hand was clenched into a fist.

Not working with the thieves by choice, then, Lemet noted, even as he stood. When you had no family to look after you, the thieves might be the only thing between you and a slow death come winter.

The horses shrieked as the coach came to a stop.

Lemet ran across the street, half hunched, ignoring Thren's shocked whisper behind him. He grabbed the boy's shoulder, spoiling his next throw, and the boy spun and tried to hit him. Lemet caught his wrist.

"They killed my mother," the boy said, pulling against Lemet's grip.

"Be quiet." Lemet looked back at the coach and heard its joints creak as the guards jumped down to the street. The driver would want to have that oiled, some part of Lemet's mind noted.

"They can't come down this street after what they did to her," the boy insisted. "They can't!"

"Be *quiet*!" Lemet shoved the boy back into the alley. The boy slipped in the mud and landed with a splash. His big eyes widened with fear, and Lemet moved to come in after him. This alley wasn't a dead end. If they ran …

A crushing force slammed Lemet against the wall, and he fell hard. He rolled over as a boot caught him hard in the ribs and stared up into the angry face of one of the guards—not the one who'd been hit by the rock.

"Did you find the little curs?" came a lazy voice from the coach.

The guard looked at Lemet, who wore mud-stained but still serviceable work clothes, then at the boy, who wore stolen rags and still held a rock in his hand.

Lemet's ribs were on fire, and he felt blood on his face where he'd hit the wall.

The guard moved toward the boy.

Lemet grabbed the guard's boot.

"How many of them were there?" came the voice from the coach again.

The guard looked hard at the boy, then at Lemet, and finally gave a tiny nod.

“Just this one, Lord Mainserei,” the guard said, and pulled Lemet out of the alley.

As the guard who’d been hit by the rock came toward Lemet, sword drawn, Lemet shut his eyes and thanked the Maker that some humans were better than others.

* * *

Celene came awake slowly, with Briala in her arms, and watched the wan autumn sun creep into her bedchamber.

She remembered sleeping longer as a girl, recuperating from a tiring day of bardic training or a late night at a party. She would wake to Val Royeaux’s brilliant sun streaming through her window, curled up under blankets as soft as clouds, and luxuriously let her mind drift back from the comfort of dreams to the excitement of what the day would bring.

That was before the whole of Orlais had become her responsibility.

Now, she read reports and studied documents by glowlamps until her head throbbed and it was too late to drink more tea, then threw herself into bed and squeezed her eyes shut, willing her mind to stop darting from problem to problem like a small dog chasing rats in the wine cellar. She woke well before dawn, her heart hammering from whatever worry had drawn her from sleep, and fenced with her fears until she found an idea worth getting up to write down.

The only time her mind gave her respite was when Briala slept beside her.

Her elven lover made soft sleeping sounds, and Celene stroked her hair absently. The black curls lightened to gray with the pre-dawn light, then slid to the light brown of cinnamon as the sun brought color to the room.

Dirt-brown, Celene had called it, when Briala had waited upon her as a girl. Horse-dung brown, an ugly shadow of Celene’s spun-gold locks. Back when they had both been children, before Celene had known the value of having a friend who could be trusted, who wasn’t a competitor in the Game.

She watched Briala's throat, where her pulse fluttered. Her skin was darker than Celene's, though she spent most of her days inside and showed no tan lines at the bare skin around her eyes. Briala tried to ignore it, but Celene knew that she was quietly ashamed of it. Not the ears that gave her away as elven even beneath the mask, not the lovely liquid eyes, but her sun-touched skin, dotted with a spray of pretty freckles.

Celene trailed a finger down Briala's bare arm, smiling as the elven woman came awake.

"You might have told me you couldn't sleep," Briala said.

"You earned a rest," Celene said with a smile, and kissed her cheek.

"How was the rest of the ball?" Briala asked, stretching as she rose. She slid out of bed and went to a small closet where Celene's enchanted teapot had been filled last night.

Celene smiled. "I believe you caught the most exciting parts." She fumbled for her robe, then caught it as Briala slid it over with her free hand even while mixing the tea. "Bann Teagan sent a letter with his sincere gratitude, and he says that he is now returning to Ferelden before he can stumble into any more trouble. Marquis de Montsimmard wishes for funds to hire mercenaries to assist the templars in tracking apostates who flee the Circle, a problem that has grown only worse since the disaster at Kirkwall. And of course, Comte Chantral of Velun continues to believe Lake Celestine to be such an unimaginable paradise that the Empress of Orlais should wish to marry it."

Briala laughed. Chantral had been polite, earnest, and clumsy for years now. "Anyone else?" She poured the tea and passed Celene a cup and saucer.

Celene took her first sip of the morning, and the tiny bit of tension at the back of her skull eased at the hot spice. She smiled, inhaled the scent, and put the cup down to pull her robe over her shoulders. "Thank you."

Briala shook her head and smiled. "It is but enlightened self-interest, Majesty. I have seen you *without* your morning tea."

Celene sniffed indignantly, then picked up her cup and saucer and took another wonderful sip. “There is news from Lydes,” she said after a moment, finally answering Briala’s question.

“Duke Remache?” Briala stopped looking through the gowns in the armoire, turning to Celene with wide eyes.

“Not long before you and Ser Michel destroyed dear Gaspard, Remache declared the grand duke to be an oaf, uncultured and boorish. He said that Gaspard would not be invited to the winter hunt in Lydes this year, and that if I found his suit agreeable, that Gaspard would not be hunting in Val Firmin, either.”

Briala was planning Celene’s dress for the day as she listened, picking out jewelry and accessories that would complement Celene’s scheduled activities. “That is a much more generous offer than earlier. If Remache can pull those lords and ladies with him, Gaspard will have no one left to listen to his calls for war with Ferelden.”

“But to lose my midnight visits from you?” Celene asked with a smile. “I think that price too high.”

Briala’s lips twitched in a smirk. “You would hardly be the first ruler to receive the occasional midnight visit from someone other than your lord husband.” But her eyes didn’t meet Celene’s as she said it. “And if marrying into Ferelden is no longer an option…”

“I fear it is not.” Celene had once, in her younger years, hoped to do through marriage what Meghren and his apocryphal mabari had failed to do by force. With the strength of Ferelden behind it willingly, the Orlesian Empire would have had the power to drive back Nevarran aggression and even give Tevinter pause.

Unfortunately, King Cailan had already been married at the time. Given how much blood had been shed to put a new king on Ferelden’s throne—and how much Ferelden still had to rebuild after the most recent Blight—any perceived manipulation from Orlais would be taken as another attack.

She could have married another Fereldan noble, of course, but that would have caused the opposite problem. The more warlike nobles, like

Gaspard, would clutch at their swords even if Celene married a Fereldan king, indignant that the empress of the world's greatest nation had lowered herself to marry the king of the dog-lords instead of one of them. If she married anything less, too many more would agree with them.

And in her heart, Celene honestly would as well.

"It is worth considering," Briala said, interrupting Celene's thoughts. Celene glanced over to see that Briala was refilling her teacup, her eyes still downcast.

"It is not." Celene took the elven woman by the shoulder and gently tilted up Briala's chin until those beautiful eyes met hers. "If I tie myself to some lord, it will be for more than good hunting grounds on the Deauvin Flats." Perhaps it was selfish. Perhaps it was a mistake in the Game, even. But Celene had lost enough of her own life to the Empire of Orlais already … as had Briala.

Briala's gaze softened. "Majesty."

"Now tell me what to expect from the minister of trade this morning."

"He'll be asking you to approve an alteration to trade taxation laws throughout the Dales." Briala turned Celene around as she spoke, peeling her robe away. "Revenue has been poor in the area, and he'll suggest a small tax increase per wagon."

"But?" Celene sighed as Briala's fingers went to work on her back, kneading away the tension already present in anticipation of a day laced into a tight corset.

"He's attacking the elven merchants." Briala's nimble fingers worked their way across Celene's shoulders and then down her spine, and Celene leaned back a little into her lover's hands. "Well, any of the less wealthy merchants, really. They use caravans of smaller wagons, while the merchants with noble backing use larger ones. A tax increase per wagon will hardly affect the nobles at all, but it could break many of the poorer merchants."

"What about an increase in the tax per stone of cargo?" Celene asked. "Factor in the weights of different goods, and it should affect the nobles and

the commoners more evenly."

"I would have to check the numbers, but that might also bring in more coin for the throne," Briala said, still working on Celene's back.

"Thank you." Celene looked to the window. The sun had crested the horizon, and the room was bright with daylight. Reluctantly, she pulled her robe back up and stepped away from Briala's calming fingers. "I would like you to find out how Gaspard fares today. If the captain of the guards has no further information, we may have to hook the bard."

"She has not formally left Gaspard's employ," Briala said. "My people lost track of her. I have them searching, but an Orlesian bard can be difficult to find when she wants to be."

Celene smiled. "Always. The sapphire hairpin, do you think, or the Antivan diamond-lace?"

Briala frowned and held both up for a moment, looking at Celene critically. "The sapphire suits you better, but to meet the merchants … Antivan diamonds are a reminder of our trade."

Celene had been thinking the same thing. "Then we sacrifice my fashion upon the altar of appropriate symbolism."

Briala stepped in, smiling, and kissed her gently. "You are a martyr, Your Radiance."

Then she plucked her mask from the dresser, moved to the mirror that hid the passageway to her room, and was gone.

Celene lifted her teacup to her lips and inhaled deeply. When she had finished her second cup, she would ring for her servants, and Briala and others would come to dress her, style her hair, and apply the day's makeup.

None but Briala would ever know about that first cup of tea, or a few stolen moments with the woman who let her sleep at night.

* * *

Gaspard acknowledged Comte Chantral of Velun's bow and waved the man to a seat. The Marquis de Montsimmard was already there, sipping his brandy.

They were in the smoking room in the home Gaspard kept in Val Royeaux. The burgundy walls and rich ironwood tables were decorated with trophies won from the hunt or from battle. In one corner, a snarling werewolf's head was mounted next to a massive darkspawn greatsword, and on a table before them, a rose carved from a single massive chunk of amber sat in a decorative crystal vase, marking a tournament Gaspard had won in his younger days.

Gaspard waved to the servant who had shown Chantral in, and the servant scurried away, closing the door behind him.

"Fancy a glass?" Gaspard said, and Chantral winced, making the absurd strings of black pearls on his mask rattle sympathetically.

"I fear that if I spend too long in my cups, I will end up spending little time in my saddle." Chantral, like Gaspard and Montsimmard, wore riding leathers rather than normal finery. The empress had invited the nobles of Val Royeaux to go hunting later in the day.

"What's this?" Montsimmard asked, laughing. He was a big man, quite a soldier in his youth, though he'd gone to fat after a bad break in a grand melee had left his sword arm permanently weakened and forced him to hang up his blade. Nevertheless, a tall yellow feather rode atop his glowing lyrium mask, marking him as a chevalier. "Cannot hold your brandy, Chantral? What is there to do in Velun besides drink?"

Chantral stiffened, and Gaspard raised a hand. "Peace, men. Montsimmard, don't be an ass." Montsimmard chuckled, raised a glass, and drank deeply. "So, Chantral. What did you think of last night's performance?"

Chantral lowered himself into a great overstuffed chair, his idiotic pearls rattling again. "I found it troubling, my lord." He nodded at Gaspard. "I see you recovered your feather."

"Oh, we have dozens of the things," Montsimmard said, chuckling. "They're always getting torn or dirty, and that's just from balls. During tournament season, you're damned lucky not to need one after every bout."

“But,” Gaspard said, gesturing at the new feather on his own mask, “the heart of the matter remains. Rather than answer a demand for satisfaction with an honorable duel, Celene chose to *curtsy* to Ferelden.”

“Using the mark of the chevaliers as a *toy*,” Montsimmard said, and there was no mirth on his face now. “She may as well play toss-the-hoop with the imperial crown.”

“I am no chevalier, as you well know,” Chantral said, which Gaspard frankly took as something of an understatement. The stiff and slender Comte of Velun had likely never even shed blood in battle. Still, his heart was in the right place, as he added, “But I too love Orlais. My father died fighting in Ferelden. I would not see his sacrifice turned into a moment’s amusement for the empress.”

“You are not alone.” Gaspard gave Chantral the smile he used in tournaments, the one that made opponents wonder what he knew that they didn’t. “There are many like us, men who are willing to save Orlais from the woman who would give it to our enemies with a kiss and a wave.”

Chantral froze. “You speak of treason, my lord.”

“I speak of the good of our empire, Chantral.” Gaspard stifled a sigh. The man had clearly known the purpose of the meeting, but like a fainting noble’s daughter, he needed to be teased into it. “Celene has ruled for twenty years, yet refuses to marry, even when this empire desperately needs strength and stability. She flirts with Ferelden and toys with you, even as our mages and templars look at what’s happening in the damned Free Marches and get dangerous ideas. She does nothing.” He finished his own brandy with a large gulp, letting out a breath as it burned its way down his throat. “And with that deadly inaction, *she* has committed treason.”

There was a long moment of silence. Montsimmard gave Gaspard a quick glance, and Gaspard shook his head slightly. It had been a calculated risk. Even if Chantral refused to join them, he could likely as not be made to stay silent with some gentle pressure. And as a chevalier, Gaspard would never be so thuggish as to kill the man in the middle of the smoking room.

“I think,” Chantral said, “that I *will* have that drink after all.”

“Good man.” Montsimmard poured another glass and passed it over, and Chantral took it with trembling fingers.

Gaspard smiled. Celene probably thought that she had won last night’s encounter, and perhaps, in the minds of court fops and dandies, she had. But those weren’t the men Orlais needed in the coming fight.

“I plan to approach her on the hunt today,” Gaspard said, “and offer her my hand. Perhaps she will see reason at last, and all of this will just be idle conversation among men over brandy.”

“It will be difficult to make your case in front of the assembled peers,” Montsimmard said, pouring himself another glass from the decanter, “much less her damned champion.”

“I can find some way to speak with her privately,” Gaspard said, chuckling, “and as for the champion, I believe he may be indisposed this afternoon.”

* * *

It had been years since Ser Michel had felt the shiver of dread, but it came to him when he saw the note lying on the bed in his chambers. It was a sudden pulsing awareness, a tightness on the skin across his face that made his teeth ache in their sockets.

Ser Michel de Chevin, read the folded note. The hand was fine and neat for the first two words, but on “de Chevin,” the lines were slanted and scratched. A normal reader might think that the sender’s hand had slipped, or that their pen had broken.

Michel opened the letter. It held a time and a place, nothing more, and no signature.

As Celene’s champion, Michel knew her daily schedule by heart. This morning, she was meeting with the trade ministers, a normal function he would not be expected to attend. In the afternoon, however, she would be hunting with the nobles still in Val Royeaux after last night’s ball. He would need to be at her side for that, both for the sake of appearance and for the practical knowledge that many titles changed hands during “hunting

accidents.” If he kept the meeting short, one way or another, Michel believed he could be back in time.

The empress’s champion was a figure who walked the periphery of the court. Though the name “de Chevin” showed that he came from noble blood, he was expected to eschew all personal ambitions, to have no loyalty save to the empress and the honor of the chevaliers. Though he was sworn to defend Celene from assassins and fight on her behalf in any challenge, he was as much confidante as guard, privy to a thousand secrets and expected to be her eyes and ears when she was not present. In any fight, in any public setting, he was the living embodiment of the empress herself, in just the same way that Grand Duke Gaspard, standing in Tevinter or Ferelden, would be a living embodiment of the might of Orlais.

Not, Michel admitted as he dressed himself, that Gaspard would appreciate the comparison at the moment.

He dressed in riding clothes. The jacket was reinforced with patches of steel along the sleeve, as were the breeches on the outside of the legs. While it didn’t offer the protection of his full armor, it let him move and gave him a few options in a fight. Today, his armor wasn’t an option. Today, he was the living embodiment of nothing and nobody.

He wore his mask until he was outside the palace, having left undetected through a servant’s door, and then slipped it into a pocket inside his jacket. Walking through Val Royeaux without his mask, he was just another man. He could have been the son of a merchant, or a soldier on leave.

Though he did not hurry, agitation kept his pace naturally quick. Soon, he was leaving the wealthy district near the palace. Off to his left, he saw a line of green beneath a tower. A few minutes later, it was a park, situated on a low hill that left it visible from most of the city. At the top of the hill, the tower was revealed to be the center of a small fortress: the Academie des Chevaliers.

The Academie was accessible by a narrow path that led through the park. By ancient tradition, only chevaliers were allowed to walk on the lawn, along with students who were using the park for exercises.

Michel saw such a group now, a dozen young men—and one or two women—in bulky training armor, climbing up the trees. Grunting with exertion, they pulled themselves up to the highest branches, grabbed a bright bolt of cloth, and then climbed back down as a master yelled at them to hurry up. As soon as their feet touched the ground, a weighted training sword and shield were shoved into their arms, and the instructors would attack with padded staffs. Michel remembered his lungs burning, his exhausted arms flapping like branches in the wind as he tried to keep his shield up. When the drill was complete, the instructors grabbed the bolts of cloth and flung them back into the trees, and it all started again. Michel stifled a grin as one student slipped and tumbled to the ground. By the look on the instructor's face, the boy would be doing extra drills tomorrow.

The years he had spent in the Academie had been the best in his life. He had entered with nothing except a letter of introduction from Comte Guy de Montfort confirming his blood and a purse full of gold to pay his tuition. He had exercised from dawn until dusk, learning how to stand, how to breathe, how to make his body move when the muscles would no longer listen. He had learned the forms for the greatsword, the sword and shield, a long blade matched with a short. He had learned how to make a trained warhorse move as though its legs were his own, and how to fight from an untrained horse without getting himself killed. He had fought in plate, in chain, and in leather, learning how to instinctively use each type of armor to his advantage.

And he had learned the proud history of the chevaliers. He had learned to hold duty and valor in battle above his own life. He had learned to lift his shield to block a blow meant for a comrade, to accept his own death as the inevitable outcome of a life lived in pursuit of honor.

When the trials at the Academie were done, he and the other senior students were taken out into the city. They were taken away from the palace, from the history books, from the tales of glory. They were driven in coaches into the slums after dark.

Your bodies have been tested, and found strong, the masters had said. Your minds have been tested, and found sharp. The masters had passed around a skin of strongwine, pushed the students out of the coaches, and said, now, test your blades. Thrice this year, the elves of these streets have done injury to a lord of Orlais, and once to a lady. Go forth and mete out the justice of the chevaliers of Orlais.

Michel had known that the tale the masters had told was most likely a lie, and that even if it were true, they had no way of knowing *which* elves had committed the crime. He had also known that the truth was not the point of this last test. He had drunk the wine, and tested his blade.

Ser Michel *de Chevin* had never looked back.

He turned away from the Academie des Chevaliers and walked into the slums.

A short time later, he walked into the tavern indicated on the note. It was a seedy hole, and this early in the day the men inside were drunks and thieves with nowhere else to go.

Melcendre, the dark-haired bard from the banquet last night, sat alone at a flimsy old table. She wore leathers today instead of a dress, and knives rode at her hip instead of a lute. She smiled as he came inside.

“Ser Michel,” she said, her smoked-honey voice full of amusement. “You honor this humble tavern with your patronage.”

He sat. “Why am I here?”

“Perhaps I wanted you to remember your childhood,” she said with a sweet smile. Michel’s fingers gripped the table until the old wood creaked. “Ah, no sense of humor among the chevaliers. I have had to learn and relearn that lesson each time I have dealt with them. The perils of making a living by your wits, you understand. And now that I think upon it,” she added, “I wonder if they would laugh when they discovered that there is some doubt about the blood of the young nobleman they trained. Do you think they would laugh, Ser Michel?”

“Do you think you are the first to seek to embarrass me for being a distant cousin to the Chevins, for coming from a dead line?” Michel glared

as the bard raised a finely plucked eyebrow and kept his voice stern and confident. “To question my birth is to question my honor, singer. After the embarrassment of a formal inquiry, I will be vindicated, while you will most certainly be dead for this insult.”

Melcendre said nothing.

It had been worth a try. Michel softened his voice. “Still, it *would* be an embarrassment, and I have little interest in your death. What is it that you wish? I don’t imagine you would have called me here unless I had something you wanted.”

The bard chuckled and snapped her fingers. Behind Michel, every man in the tavern drew a blade.

“Ser Michel, you have already delivered it.”

3

Michel listened to the metallic hiss of blades coming out of scabbards behind him.

“Six?” he asked the bard.

She smirked. “Seven, but who’s counting?”

Michel spun, kicked the chair at the men behind him, and moved.

His blade—not his formal blade, but a red steel longsword that was good enough to use but simple enough to avoid attention—slid out of its sheath and into the first man’s throat in a flawless execution of *Duelist Catches an Apple.*

None of the men had even moved yet, and as the shocked cry went up, Michel shouldered the dying man into one of his comrades, then stabbed *through* him and into the other man with a perfectly aimed thrust he’d learned from *Second Shield*. Both men fell as Michel yanked his blade free.

Seven was now five. Melcendre had drawn a dagger, but kept well back from the melee.

The rest were moving now, swinging at him, and Michel dove into their midst. He batted down most of the strikes on the right with a great sweeping blow, took one on the reinforced forearm of his jacket on the left, and broke through the circle where they’d tried to pin him.

No second blade, so much of *Bear Mauls the Wolves* didn’t apply. He kicked his fallen chair to the left to slow the men down, then moved right, holding his longsword with both hands as he swung low at the nearest

enemy’s knees. The man in front of him moved to block his strike, and Michel used his two-handed grip to reverse direction and stab up, catching the man with a shallow but ugly cut across the face.

Four. Melcendre had a table between her and Michel, looking at him nervously.

Michel swung back to his left, knocking aside a blow he’d only heard, and stepped in to smash his pommel into his enemy’s face. He was too close to stab the man, but he stabbed *past* him, another nasty maneuver from *Second Shield*, and caught the man behind him by surprise in the knee. With a roar, Michel lunged forward and drove both men backward. They hit a table and fell, and Michel stepped back and stabbed once, twice, ending them.

Three and two. From the corner of his vision, he saw Melcendre break for the door.

He wasn’t fast enough as he turned, and hot pain slashed across his side as the man behind him connected. He grimaced, batted aside the second strike, chopped down across the man’s wrists, then slashed up and across his throat.

One left. The bard herself.

Michel dashed across the room and out the door, frantically trying to find her before she lost herself in the market crowd outside.

He saw motion in the corner of his eye, something thrown, and turned and slashed.

It was a thin cloth pouch, and it burst at his strike, sending a cloud of green dust into his face.

He stumbled back, coughing and choking as pain seared his eyes and throat. Blinded, unable to breathe, Michel wanted nothing more than to curl up on the ground, but years of training kept him on his feet, blade up and instinctively moving into a defensive spin.

It did him no good. Something blunt slammed into his head from behind.

He hit the ground, his last waking thought that his masters would have been disgusted with him for forgetting that he should have made the bard his first kill.

* * *

Celene was greatly displeased to find her champion missing when it came time for the afternoon's hunting expedition in the gently tamed woods outside Val Royeaux. After last night's victory, it was vital to keep momentum going, to keep Gaspard back on his heels for the few weeks it would take Divine Justinia to prepare herself and commit the Chantry to direct action in the growing hostility between the templars and the mages. The hunting trip would give her a chance to gauge the nobles who were undecided and point them in the right direction, and show the nobles allied with Gaspard that moving against her would have consequences.

Ser Michel was nothing if not punctual and responsible. He had left no message. It was clear that his absence was not intentional, then.

Celene dispatched Briala to find him. Then, because canceling the hunt would be an act of weakness, she called for her shining white mare, adjusted her riding skirts, and went off to battle.

The lords, and those ladies who rode, numbered perhaps a dozen, plus their servants, Celene's guards (enough to protect her even without her champion present), and the huntsmen who handled the minutiae that the nobles did not care to attend to themselves. As they rode into the woods—carefully sculpted woods, enough to offer fine hunting, but not enough to pose a real threat to an inexperienced rider—there was noise all around Celene. Gruff orders from the servants to their underlings, banter and laughter amongst the nobles, the occasional barking of the hunting dogs. The nobles wore riding gowns or leathers, all of it accented with silver and gold and ribbons that complemented their riding masks. The servants trailed behind, always ready to rush up with a goblet of watered wine or a skewer of meat, cheese, and wine-soaked fruit for a rider more interested in eating than hunting.

Celene rode in icy silence, a polite smile frozen upon her face. In her agitation while ordering the search for Michel, she had neglected to take tea before she had left, and her nerves felt simultaneously raw and clouded at the lack.

Beside her, Grand Duke Gaspard rode in the place normally taken by Ser Michel.

“You did not bring a bow, Gaspard?” Marquis de Montsimmard called, bringing his stallion up close.

Gaspard looked back. “I did not,” he said. “I would not wish to frighten any of noble birth with the sight of blood.”

“Then what will you drink, cousin?” Celene asked without looking over. Gaspard chuckled.

“You cannot expect to bring down anything without a bow,” Lord Chantral called over. He was flushed and awkward in the saddle.

“If need be,” Gaspard said, still smiling, “I shall use a feather.”

The nobles went silent.

“Not your strongest weapon,” Celene observed, “given how easily you were disarmed last night.”

The nobles laughed, but it was a nervous laugh, not the rich reaction of a crowd on her side. Had she misjudged last night’s victory?

Then, up ahead, the dogs bayed in pursuit. Celene turned to the group. “Let us be off!” With a nod to her guards, she spurred her mount and rode off into the woods.

The other nobles were surprised—Celene’s hunts were usually a more relaxed affair, with the nobles riding as a group to find whatever poor animal had been treed or cornered by the hounds and then finishing the beast off with bows or blades. The exchange with Gaspard had shaken her, though, and she needed the disruption to gather herself for the next exchange. Her horse pounded through the woods, quickly losing the others as each noble found a different route through the trees, trying to reach the quarry first.

Then the clop of hooves behind her proved her wrong. It was a heavy horse with an experienced rider, and rather than appear to flee, Celene slowed her mare to a trot. Gaspard pulled abreast of her a moment later. “Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Cousin.”

In moments, the rest of the nobles were out of earshot, and the pair rode along the easy and well-maintained trail. “It would have been a waste to bring my bow, in any event,” Gaspard said after a time.

“Are you that incompetent a huntsman?” Celene asked.

Gaspard chuckled. “No. But these woods are so tame. Practically a park. I prefer the hunting in Lydes.”

“A pity you won’t be visiting Duke Remache to hunt this winter, then.”

“Actually, Remache invited me late last night, after the ball,” Gaspard said, his voice going hard. “He said that the forest had grown so dangerous that he welcomed the company of a man of honor.”

“Oh, stop,” Celene said in irritation. “There’s nobody but us around.”

Gaspard was silent beside her for a moment. Then he burst out laughing. “Maker’s breath, Celene!” He slapped his leg. “You’ve never lacked for courage, I’ll give you that. Were you a man, you’d be leading the armies yourself.”

“Is that why you must plot against me, Gaspard?” she asked, looking over. “Because I’m not a man?”

He actually seemed to think about it. “No,” he finally said, “the real problem is that you aren’t me.”

“Few people are, Gaspard.” Celene shook her head. At least he was honest in his folly.

They came into a clearing, and Celene pulled up her mount. “You have Montsimmard and now Chantral, and you claim to have Remache.”

“Among others.” Gaspard shrugged. “It would seem the feather went too far.”

“You would threaten Orlais to gain the throne? *Now?*”

“Absolutely.”

Celene gestured angrily. “You better than anyone should know that the mages and the templars will be at war within a season unless we can prevent it!”

“They certainly will, and I don’t see that Your *Radiance* has done anything to stop it.”

“And *I don’t see,* Grand Duke, that invading Ferelden will help.” She glared at him. “Had you killed Bann Teagan, our soldiers would have been dying for your folly by spring.”

“A good war unites the empire. Maybe we can let those idiots in the Chantry and the Circle kill people outside our borders instead of inside them.” Gaspard reached up and, to Celene’s surprise, removed his mask.

It had been years since she’d seen his full face. His features were still hawk-sharp and rugged, and he spent enough time outdoors to have tan lines around the edges of where his mask normally sat.

It was effectively a challenge.

After a moment, Celene pulled her own mask free as well. He gave a small nod, still smiling.

“You’re right, you know,” he said. “We *do* need a strong empire right now. We cannot afford to play games while war looms.”

“And yet you yourself play games, inflaming our relationship with Ferelden and assuming that I sit idle while the Chantry breaks around us.”

Gaspard raised an eyebrow. “You’re ceding power to Justinia.”

“I am giving the Chantry one chance to repair itself before I must write my name into history as the Mad Empress who bathed Orlais in the blood of its people.”

He shook his head. “You always cared too much about what history would say, Celene.” Then he leaned forward. “Marry me.”

It took her by surprise, and she knew the shock showed on her face. She damned him for bullying her into removing her mask. “You presume much, cousin.”

“You’ve got steel in your spine, Celene.” His voice carried no mockery, no humor. “I admire that.”

“Your wife killed my mother.”

“For which your father killed her,” Gaspard said with no particular heat, “and then died himself, likely because of the poisoned stiletto Calienne always had up her sleeve. And that was the Game, played faithfully by both your side and mine. If you wish to dwell on our bloody history instead of saving Orlais, you are less than the woman I think you are.” He let out a breath, and looked at her with a small smile. “I thought you were out of the Game once your parents were dead. So did Duke Bastien, and so did Duke Germain. We were all wrong.” He gestured around at the woods, taking in all of Orlais with a sweep of his arm. “You care about the university, the treaties, the balls and banquets. I don’t.” He smiled again, a predator’s smile. “But I can keep Orlais safe, no matter how much blood it takes. Together, we could save this empire.”

The fact that they were distantly related meant little, and in truth, such a marriage would bring all of Orlais together. Celene actually considered it for a moment, staring at Gaspard as he sat unmasked on his great warhorse, proud and rugged.

But finally, she shook her head. “I need your wisdom and strength in defending the empire, Gaspard. I do not need a husband.”

He shook his head. “Had to ask,” he said with a shrug.

Then, with a speed that belied his size, he kneed his horse over to her. His hand came down on her shoulder.

“Your guards are out of earshot, and your champion seems to be indisposed, Celene,” he said, grimacing. “I had no part in your mother’s death—I find the whole damned thing distasteful, in fact—but I do know how to arrange a hunting accident.”

Celene’s hand wrapped around his wrist, and he cried out in pain, then lurched back. Smoke rose from his arm, and the fine cloth was scorched. He clutched the injured wrist to his chest.

“I took the throne at sixteen, Gaspard, after your wife *killed* my mother,” she said, holding up her hand and showing him a glittering ruby ring that crackled with fire. “And no, I have no wish to discuss our family’s bloody

history. I know it quite well, thank you." With a twitch of her fingers, she slid a knife free from a hidden sheath on her arm. It crackled with fire as she raised it. "And I have not ruled Orlais for twenty years with balls and banquets."

His hand went to his sword, and for a moment, they were both still.

He moved, and Celene lashed out, trailing a line of fire across his forearm as his blade cleared its sheath. She kneed her horse out of range and held herself low. The reach from his blade put the odds in his favor, but if she had done enough injury to his sword-arm …

Then in the distance, the hounds bayed again. Gaspard glanced in that direction, and then sighed and dipped his head in a brief bow. "Just remember, cousin. Everything that happens, you could have avoided with wedding vows." He sheathed his sword.

She could raise the alarm right then, she knew. Some of Gaspard's nobles were hardened loyalists, but some would blanch at drawing steel on the empress. She could have her cousin in shackles as soon as her guards arrived.

But if she did, Orlais would be at war before the sun set.

He slid his mask back on and, still holding his burnt arm close, rode back out of the clearing.

Celene shook her head and slid her knife back into its sheath. "Indisposed," she murmured. "We'll need to find Ser Michel."

* * *

Briala snuck out of the palace and left her mask, along with her fine fur cloak, in one of the hidden caches she used for such purposes. Then, as just another elf—one of dozens serving the merchants and caravan drivers in the market district—she began looking for word of Ser Michel.

The most famous spies in Orlais were the bards. They were legendary for their ability to ferret out information, to lay intrigue and dissemble with skill enough to turn nobles to their purposes. They were invited to play despite this, and sometimes even because of it. The lords and ladies who

played the Game always fancied themselves cunning enough to match wits with a master of lies and learn something from the exchange.

But even as the bards outplayed the nobles, they were watched. They were famous. They were legendary.

Briala was just another elf in the market. And the elves were everywhere.

She learned from an elven boy unloading spices that Churneau was expecting a poor harvest this year. An old elven woman washing cloth that had gotten soaked in the rain mentioned that the merchants in Val Firmin thought something strange was going on at Adamant Fortress. And after Briala plied him with kind words and a smile, a human coach driver mentioned that Comte Chantral had been driven to a meeting at Grand Duke Gaspard's estate that very morning.

Briala walked, and watched, and listened, waiting for the lead that would point her in the right direction.

As a child, Briala had been silent and watchful, fixing ten-year-old Celene's hair while Dowager Marquise Mantillon and Duke Prosper, Celene's mother's cousin, had dined with Celene's parents. They had been talking about hunting, and how they expected various nobles to do when the season opened. Duke Prosper had said that Ferdinand and his daughter would have trouble catching anything, since Ferdinand's brother Meghren had ruined the family bow. It had seemed silly and pointless to Briala.

Then Prosper had said that Lady Celene would have a chance to try her hand at hunting the golden lion, and Briala knew how strange that was, because Celene had only barely begun the archery lessons Lady Mantillon had suggested to help Celene's posture, and while Briala had never even seen a lion, she was certain that they were too dangerous to fight.

But Celene's breath had caught as Duke Prosper said it, and Lady Mantillon and Celene's parents had looked at the girl, and Briala had looked past them, carefully not making eye contact as her father had taught, and seen the crest of Celene's family, the Valmonts, a golden lion on a field of

purple, and she had realized that the humans had not been really talking about hunting at all.

She had remembered how her mother had argued with another elven servant before Briala had become Celene's handmaiden, how the other servant had said that Briala would work in the kitchens instead and her *own* daughter would serve Celene, but the next morning, the servant was gone, and everyone was talking about how she had been caught stealing from Prince Reynaud's purse.

Briala's mother had said nothing, but had told Briala to be very careful, to obey Celene in everything, and to become the human noble girl's friend.

Listening to the nobles talk about hunting for the throne of Orlais, Briala had only then realized how much her mother had done.

"Stupid knife-eared whore!" Back in the present, Briala watched as a human seamstress yelled at her elven serving girl. The girl blushed, staring at her shoes, while all around the market, men grinned and elves found elsewhere to look.

Briala consoled herself by noting that a few of the merchants themselves were elven. Though still rare, elven merchants with unique goods were allowed into the upper-class market, and Celene had declared threats against them to be unseemly and distasteful in her last visit. Slowly but surely, Briala's people were gaining ground.

It had been Celene who had taught Briala to watch, since a girl, especially an elven girl, could not act as a man did. A man who acted quickly and aggressively was praised as bold and daring. A woman who did the same was foolish or desperate. As an elf and a commoner, Briala could not even defend herself from insult or assault, at least not while wearing the Valmont family servant's mask. Her strength lay in her invisibility, in the way the nobles she served would say things to each other in the little noble's code of metaphors and euphemisms, never guessing that she understood what they were saying and was passing every word to Celene. As she had watched Celene's family play the Game, Briala had trained in the greatest weapons a lady possessed: her eyes and ears.

It had been Briala who had held Celene when her mother had died—a hunting accident, the nobles all said, but Briala had known what "hunting" meant by then, and Duke Prosper had wept openly as he promised Celene and her father any support he had to offer. It had been Briala who crept out into the shadows outside the smoking room and listened for Celene on the night before Duke Prosper and Celene's father, Prince Reynaud, had gone off to pay a visit to Duke Bastien de Ghyslain, the man whose daughter had arranged for the hunting accident.

It had been Briala who had seen the tiny wound on Prince Reynaud's arm when he returned from the visit to Duke Bastien, where Bastien's daughter had died in a *hunting accident* herself—the wound that had grown darker and fouler until it claimed Celene's father's life, and which all the servants whispered had to have been poison, for all that the story would always be that Prince Reynaud had died of illness.

And it had been Briala who had helped Celene—sixteen, hollow-eyed, with both her parents dead—when Duke Prosper had been called away by Emperor Florian himself.

Briala had dressed Celene for the balls, badgering the servants to learn what the other ladies would be wearing and giving Celene a tiny edge where she could. Briala had stood to serve refreshments while Celene hosted the son of Comtess Jeannevere and then the son of Lady Mantillon herself, helping with tiny suggestions given through gestures learned from the Orlesian bards as Celene charmed the young men and won their support in her fight for the throne of the greatest empire in the known world. Briala had seen the flicker of boredom beneath the mask on Jeannevere's son when Celene's back was turned, and with a tiny gesture had guided Celene to be louder and more daring in her speech, catching the boy's attention. Briala had seen how Lady Mantillon's son kept stealing glances at Prince Reynaud's sword on the wall, and had convinced Celene with a single look to turn her words to military history and capture young Lord Mantillon's heart.

Briala had been the one Celene hugged in fierce delight when Lady Mantillon extended the invitation to Celene for the first time since the death of her parents.

Remembering the warmth of victory only made Briala's current frustration mount. She spent an hour in the market, but heard nothing of Ser Michel's whereabouts. Wherever he had gone, he had not gone as Celene's champion.

Wherever he was, he was in danger. Michel had never been anything except loyal, and for him to simply abandon Celene now was unthinkable. She had found nothing untoward in his background, nothing that anyone could use as leverage to turn him to their cause. He had no living family, and came from a minor branch of the Chevins. Even if the Chevin family cared, Etienne Chevin was one of Celene's closest allies.

No, it was something else, and Michel was either in trouble or, as only a minor lord, he was already dead. When the stakes in the Game were high enough, anyone who stood near the nobles without sufficient rank to protect themselves was in danger. Briala had learned that lesson well.

"Hush, Bria," Celene said softly from the other side of the curtain. "I can hear you breathing, and it's absolutely vital that you be quiet right now."

Briala pulled the red velvet curtain aside. Her hands shook as she did.

There was a pool of red on the floor of the reading room, staining the rich Nevarran carpet. It had spread almost to the curtain.

At the other end of the pool were Briala's parents.

Then Celene stepped in to block Briala's view. Her hands were warm on Briala's arms. "Assassins. They killed all the servants, and they could be back soon."

"But why?" Briala asked. She tried to look past Celene's shoulder, but Celene blocked her view again. "Why would they do this? You were meeting Lady Mantillon. She was supposed to help you!"

"It's like what happened to Mother and Father." Celene's eyes filled with tears. She wiped her eyes, a ring glittering on her finger. "Lady

Mantillon has agreed to support me, but … Emperor Florian doesn't approve, I think. They must have been trying to find me."

"But they knew you were gone for the evening." It was hard for Briala to think. "I heard them talking while I hid. They said to hurry. That you would return soon. If they knew, they…" Briala was stammering. "You met Lady Mantillon in secret. No one knew you were going, except Lady Mantillon herself." She met Celene's eyes. "She sent them."

"Bria…"

The reading room was too hot, the air sticky with the smell of copper. "Gaspard has no idea you are still in the Game. He thinks the throne is his. He'd have no reason to send assassins after you now. And if they came from him, they might have known you were visiting Lady Mantillon, but they wouldn't have known when you'd be home. They could only know that if she had sent them. To … to keep her meeting with you secret."

Tears rolled down Celene's cheeks. "If she did this … Maker, Bria, I'm so sorry. I never thought … You need to go." She wiped her eyes again and twisted the ring on her finger in agitation. "They'll kill you if they find you, Bria. You need to hurry."

"Where?" Briala stepped back in fear. Her foot slipped. The trail of red had reached her. She hung on to the curtain to keep from falling. "I've lived my whole life here, mistress. Where am I supposed to go?"

"Go to the Dalish." Celene's voice carried the brisk certainty of command. The part of Briala's mind that still worked noted that she was impersonating her mother's voice. "You've a brilliant mind, and you know the court of Orlais better than any elf alive. They'd be fools not to take you in and … use what you've learned."

"You want me to try to find the Dalish? Mistress, I can't even—"

"You can. And you will. For me, Bria. You will live for me*, do you understand me?" Celene lunged forward. Briala flinched, and then Celene's lips were crushed against hers.*

For just a moment, everything else vanished, and the whole world was the heat of Celene's body against her, the smell of her face paint, the taste of

her lips.

Celene pulled her in tight, arms wrapped around her waist … and then pushed her away. "Take my cloak and the old mask I wore last autumn. The cloak will hide your ears, and you can get a coach. Act like me, and get as far as you can. After that…" Celene fumbled with her hair, then angrily yanked something free. "After that, sell this and buy passage to the Dales."

Celene shoved Lady Mantillon's jeweled hairclip into Briala's hand so hard that it cut her palm.

It was late in the afternoon by the time Briala's contact arrived at the café where she waited. She met him each month, and usually just shared information, but today, with no leads on Ser Michel, she was ready to beg a favor.

Finally, a cloaked man walked into the café, his face hidden beneath the hood and his movements fluid and compact, like a hunter moving through the woods. He stalked to Briala's seat in silence, gliding through the room and ignoring the curious looks from the café patrons.

He sat down at Briala's table. In the gentle afternoon light, Briala could just make out the tattoos that marked his face. Among the Dalish, they were known as *vallaslin*, "blood writing."

"Felassan," she said with relief.

"Aneth ara, da'len," he said in perfect elven, and then grinned. "What in sweet Sylaise's name is wrong with you?"

* * *

Briala followed Felassan outside. Neither elf spoke. She had learned to trust his silences. That serenity and patience was part of being Dalish, living outside the world of the *shemlen*, as the Dalish elves called humans. Or at least it was according to Felassan.

Briala had made it as far as Halamshiral with her disguise and the money she'd received for the hairclip. The city was the ancient home of the elves, and the Dales beyond the city gave the Dalish their name.

If not for Felassan, she would have fallen to the human bandits who had found her alone on the road. They had died to a man, killed by the first elf Briala had ever seen strike a human.

She had seen in that moment a world where she didn't need to bow her head and try to smile when the coachmen grabbed at her as she walked by. She'd seen a life without having to remind herself that "rabbit" was better than "knife-ear." She'd seen a world where nobles didn't send out assassins to kill her parents.

And then, over a dinner of venison and brown bread, Felassan had listened to her story and told her that if she wanted that world, she needed to go back to Celene.

She had never made it to the Dalish camp.

Felassan stopped in a park in the center of the merchant district. He ignored the bench, stepped onto the lawn, and leaned against a tree.

"Tamed," he said, "but better than that wretched building. How do you stay indoors all day?"

"Practice. You aren't supposed to be on the grass," Briala said, looking around uncomfortably. "If anyone sees you…"

"How scandalous." He smiled, the tattoos on his face curling around his violet eyes as he did. "How goes the game between your empress and her … cousin? Brother?"

"Cousin. Well, close to a cousin, although—"

"Details, *da'len*." Felassan waved absently. "You know how I feel about details."

"I do." Briala took a breath. Felassan's attitude seemed closer to a court fop than the ancient figure of wisdom she had expected … but he had taught her as much as Celene, in the years she had known him. "I've gotten Celene to help the elven merchants, and she's gotten them into the universities as well. But she is also attempting to get the Chantry to deal with the tensions between the templars and the mages, which has left her vulnerable."

“Rather foolish of her.” Felassan picked at the bark of the tree. “Why would she give up power to the religious people? Even the *shemlen* have to know that’s a terrible idea.”

“She hopes to keep it a quiet internal matter,” said Briala. “The Circle of Magi and the templars are also controlled by the Chantry.”

“Also a terrible idea.” Felassan plucked off a bit of bark, popped it into his mouth, and chewed.

“What are you doing?”

“The Dalish know many medicinal remedies that the humans have forgotten,” Felassan said, chewing. “Certain types of bark can be chewed to ease headaches.” He paused. “Not this kind, though. Sadly, this is just bark.”

Briala shook her head. It was pointless to engage him when he was in one of these moods. “How would you solve the problem between the mages and the templars?”

“Wait for them to get tired of killing each other.” Felassan took the chewed bark out of his mouth, squinted, and stuck it back on the tree.

“That might take too long, revered teacher.”

“It will happen eventually, *da’len*.” Felassan opened his eyes. “My name, among our people, means ‘slow arrow.’ It comes from a story in which the god Fen’Harel was asked by a village to kill a great beast. He came to the beast at dawn, and saw its strength, and knew it would slay him if he fought it. So instead, he shot an arrow up into the sky. The villagers asked Fen’Harel how he would save them, and he said to them, ‘When did I say that I would save you?’ And he left, and the great beast came into the village that night and killed the warriors, and the women, and the elders. It came to the children and opened its great maw, but then the arrow that Fen’Harel had loosed fell from the sky into the great beast’s mouth, and killed it. The children of the village wept for their parents and elders, but still they made an offering to Fen’Harel of thanks, for he had done what the villagers had asked. He had killed the beast, with his cunning, and a slow arrow that the beast never noticed.”

Briala thought about the story for a moment. Her teacher would disapprove if she jumped to conclusions. “Fen’Harel the trickster, never truly on anyone’s side.”

“Fen’Harel was a sneaky bastard that way, according to the old stories,” Felassan said.

“And you are the slow arrow?”

Felassan smiled. “I hope so.” He shrugged. “It may be that your empress cannot stop this war. Perhaps the mages and the templars will destroy each other, and when that foolish and inevitable war comes, the *shemlen* will be weak enough for the elves to retake the Dales. We will find out someday. Today, you are helping the elves who live under the rule of this empire. Let that be enough.”

“I am concerned about Celene’s champion.” Briala stood. “He has disappeared, and I cannot find him.” Briala looked around and lowered her voice. “Can you help me?”

“I know a few tricks, yes.” Felassan laughed. “Do you have something of his? Something he held or wore?”

Smiling, Briala held out a tall yellow feather.

4

Michel woke to hot-eyed pain. Blinking away tears, he coughed, tried to sit up, and groaned as his skull protested.

He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. It had been one of the first lessons the chevaliers had taught him. To master the outside world, he had to master himself. He felt the air enter his lungs, felt his heart pumping blood to muscles that ached but were still ready to obey his commands.

His arms and legs were bound. Rope, not shackles. The cut on his side—he refused to dignify something so small with the word *wound*—burned with pain, but was shallow enough to be nothing more than an annoyance. He flexed his muscles, testing the bindings and restoring circulation. Two more breaths, clearing the remains of the choking dust Gaspard's bard had flung into his face.

When Michel had mastered himself, he opened his eyes.

He was in a warehouse, tied to a post and surrounded by crates that effectively formed a room. Light crept into the room through small barred windows and hung suspended in glittering dust motes. The floor was simple dirt, and the crates stank of rotting fruit and old cloth. Outside, he heard the clatter of wagon wheels and distant shouts that told him he was still in Val Royeaux. But no one in the merchant district would have let their warehouse remain in this sorry state.

He was in the slums, then.

The bard had taken his sword and daggers and stripped off his jacket, leaving him in a simple linen undershirt with a red-stained tear along the ribs. Michel had no hidden weapons—the chevaliers trained warriors, not assassins.

At the sound of footsteps, Michel straightened. The code of the chevaliers allowed for the use of surprise and tactical ambushes, contrary to the way foolish chevaliers acted in plays for the peasants. Had he some way to get free, he could have feigned sleep and then attacked without shame. But without such an option, he refused to show weakness before an enemy.

Melcendre came around the corner and into the little cave of crates. “Already awake?” She dropped to one knee, safely out of reach in case he tried to kick at her. “Impressive. The men back at the tavern are all still unconscious. Those who aren’t dead, of course.”

“What do you want?” Michel’s throat still burned from whatever had been in the pouch, but he kept his voice from breaking.

“Perhaps I just wish to get to know you.” Melcendre smiled sweetly and tossed her dark curls over her shoulder. “We didn’t have time for a proper introduction at Celene’s banquet, and you were otherwise occupied in the tavern today.” She stood and pressed a fine-fingered hand to one of the crates, then pulled it back and rubbed her fingers. “I apologize for the accommodations. We’re in the elven district, near the big tree in the market square. Even without your mask, you’re a little too well known to stay where someone might see you.” Then she looked down at him and smiled. “But you’re not *really* that well known, are you?”

“What do you want?” Michel asked again.

Melcendre sighed. “No space in your chevalier’s heart for simple courtesy? But then, I don’t think you came from a family where courtesy was taught.” At his silence, she smiled again. “Did you know your patron, Comte Brevin de Chalons, donated his library to the University of Orlais upon his death?”

“Comte Brevin was an avid scholar,” Michel said, and Melcendre smiled, evidently pleased that they were having a conversation.

“So he was. Now, the tricky thing is that servants can sometimes be quite sloppy with the books. It’s so easy to put a list of financial transactions in with a study on the Qunari or the healing properties of ground drake horns.” Melcendre coyly put a finger to her cheek and affected a thoughtful look. “When it came to your training, Ser Michel, he spent a great deal.”

“My family died when I was young,” Michel said, keeping his voice even, “and Comte Brevin took me in. He also paid for my induction into the Academie des Chevaliers.”

Melcendre shook her head. “There is a man in Montfort they call *le Mage du Sang*.” At Michel’s blank look, she cocked her head, thinking. “So you were never told. Your patron, Comte Brevin, paid the man quite a sum on your behalf.”

Michel’s jaw clenched. “A blood mage? That is a lie, bard. Comte Brevin was a good man.” Good enough to see a boy of ten fighting off three larger boys in an alley and order his coach to stop and help. Good enough to take the boy in and offer a hot meal and a chance, as the old noble had put it, to put that strength to better use than scrabbling for scraps. “He would never trade with blood mages.”

“Ah, but this was but a name,” Melcendre said, giving him her flirtatious smile again. “You see, *le Mage du Sang* is actually a scribe and an expert in heraldry and legal documents. He gained his name from his ability to conjure noble blood out of thin air.”

Michel had been living for three years in Comte Brevin’s household when he was awakened by his lord, who had come into his room quietly with a piece of paper that changed everything. Brevin had said that Michel’s skill with a blade would be wasted in a position as a guard or mercenary. He had said that Michel had a rare gift, and gifts must be nurtured, for the good of the empire. And finally, he had said that if the Academie des Chevaliers only accepted those of noble blood, well, there were nobles lying dead who had no further use for their names, and their departed spirits would be honored to lend their titles to such a worthy cause.

Melcendre almost seemed sad, staring at him, and Michel realized that he had given something away in his silence. “He recorded a payment—quite a large payment, in fact. He must have believed in you quite highly.” She sighed. “And he was right. You have become Celene’s champion.”

“Yes. I am the empress’s champion,” Michel said, “and you serve Gaspard. So why do I still draw breath?”

“Because dead, you would be a martyr slain by the grand duke as an act of villainous treachery,” Melcendre said, kneeling back down beside him. “But alive, and with your false claim to nobility brought to light, you would disgrace your empress. Imagine the trial, the public execution, the *scandal*, Michel. That is why you are still alive.”

Yet in her victory, she did not seem happy. There was a weakness in her smile, as her eyes fled from his.

“I would sooner die,” he told her.

“I know.” She nodded and let out a slow breath. “And it seems a waste, either way. I have seen my share of tournaments, and I can say with no small certainty that you were a man born to wield a blade. Who cares whether you are truly a noble?” She shook her head bitterly. “I play the Game better than most courtiers, and I was born the bastard daughter of a milkmaid and a soldier on leave. It is a lie they tell us to keep us in our place.”

“Perhaps.” Michel shrugged, trying to seem unconcerned. “But we have still found ourselves here.”

Melcendre gave him the sad smile again. “At least you serve a mistress who cares for those not of noble blood. You have that. I heard she forced the university to let in not just a commoner, but an elf … ah, *there* it is.”

Then her sadness was gone, and her pleased, cat-in-the-cream smile was back, and Michel cursed himself for a fool for talking to an Orlesian bard and thinking he could play upon her sympathy. The cold, tight feeling of dread washed over him, but he kept his face impassive. “There *what* is?”

“I did tell you that I grew up on a farm.” Melcendre sat beside him now with easy familiarity. “Terribly dull, which is why I fled as soon as I could,

and found a new life and a new name. I'm sure you can sympathize." She elbowed him playfully. "But I do remember a few things. When you mate a white cow with a black bull, you get calves with black and white spots. When you mate a gray mare with a black stallion, you get a gray foal … although that foal might one day grow up to sire a black foal himself. It's like a little of the black stayed in the blood. That's how it works with cattle, and horses, and … well, with everything, really."

She knew.

"But when a human," Melcendre said as though discussing the weather, "mates with an *elf*, the offspring is always human. No elven ears, no big pretty eyes, just a human. No way to tell him from a real man." She glanced over and added, "Unless he gives it away himself."

Michel swallowed.

"Gaspard wanted you removed, and he asked that I hunt for information he could use against you, but he asked that I not kill you unless absolutely necessary. He's such a gentleman." She smirked. "He would have been pleased beyond measure when I told him that you were a commoner hiding behind a false title. When I tell him that you're the son of some knife-eared whore, can you *imagine* what that will do to Celene's little court?"

She said it coyly, with a smile that said she'd found a naughty little secret. She was pleased with herself, willing to let Michel beg for mercy or offer her a better deal. Or maybe she was toying with him again, looking to get even more information like the trained spy and manipulator that she was.

Ser Michel smashed his forehead into her face. As she fell on her side, he rolled to his back and shoved his arms down, hooked his hands under his curled feet, and then brought them up, still bound, over Melcendre's head. He looped, twisted, and pulled the rope taut, and her cries of pain choked off into frantic gurgles.

"I am Ser Michel de Chevin," he said as he pulled on the rope around her throat.

With the last of her strength, Melcendre slid a dagger free from a sheath at her hip. Before she could bring it to bear, Michel yanked his hands up, then slammed them down, smashing Melcendre's head against the ground. She went limp, and he did it again. Then again.

"I am Ser Michel de Chevin." He grabbed the dagger from her unresisting hand and sawed through the ropes that bound him. In moments, he was free, standing over her.

Her breast still moved with breath.

"I am Ser Michel de Chevin," he said again as he knelt beside her and finished it with a clean cut.

When he came back to his feet, Gaspard's men were there.

* * *

Briala had grown up believing in the Maker and living in accordance with the Chant of Light. Much of that belief had spilled onto the reading room floor with her parents' blood, and though Felassan had been reluctant to teach her too much of the ways of the elven gods, she had quietly come to look to Andruil, Goddess of the Hunt, with reverence.

But for all that she thought of herself as having cast off her Chantry upbringing, watching Felassan practice magic still raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

Briala's mentor held the feather to his forehead, closed his eyes, and passed his hand over it. The feather glittered once, as though the afternoon sun shone more brightly upon it, and Felassan nodded. "Shall we?" Without further comment, he started walking.

"What is it like?" Briala asked, walking beside him. They were heading toward the slums, an unlikely place for Celene's champion. She nodded to an elven merchant she'd helped last year and got a surreptitious smile in return.

Felassan seemed to consider the question carefully. Finally, he glanced over at her and said, "Itchy."

"Itchy?" Briala glared. "That is … not a very helpful answer."

“Consider asking better questions, *da’len*.” Felassan grinned. “Asking a mage to describe magic is like asking you to describe a sunset to a blind dwarf.”

If his cloak slipped off and the tattoos on his face were revealed, every elf in the marketplace would either throw themselves at his feet or draw blades to fight this creature out of legend. And for all that, he didn’t bother to put on boots, and he wore clothes that would better suit a woodsman than a living myth. He told bad jokes and refused to take anything in the world of men seriously. She wondered if that was why he moved through the world untouched.

“How are the Dalish?” she asked. “You have not spoken of your people.”

Beneath his cloak, his face lit up with enthusiasm. “They have a *wonderful* new plan! It ends with the *shemlen* killing each other off, leaving the Dales free for the elves to rule.”

Briala raised an eyebrow. “How does it begin?”

“Riding around in wagons pulled by deer. They’re still working on the middle.”

“How fortunate that they have you,” Briala said, and Felassan chuckled and shook his head.

“Do you ever tire of it, Briala?” he asked then. “Walking among the fools, bending them to your will with a word here and a gesture there?”

Briala started to answer, then stopped at Felassan’s stare. It was intent, almost angry, his eyes glittering inside the shadows of his cloak.

She thought of the chatelaine, the captain of the palace guard. She thought of the countless nobles who ignored her or called her “rabbit.”

She thought of Celene’s soft fingers trailing down her bare arm.

“I believe I am doing good work,” she finally said.

Felassan nodded and looked away. “Yes, that lasts for a while.”

They entered the slums. There were more elves than men now, and the looks they shot Briala and Felassan were narrow-eyed and angry. Felassan could easily be one of them, with his simple clothes and his hidden face.

Briala, by contrast, wore a clean dress that had never been patched and fine leather boots that still had enough sole to clap on the stones with each step. Even without a mask, every elf who laid eyes on her could see that she served the nobles.

She had turned her back on her people.

For a moment, as she always did, she wanted to try to explain. She could tell them the truth, that they had an ally in the imperial palace. They would hear about elves being accepted in the upper markets and the university, and they would …

And then, as she always did, she sighed to herself and kept walking, ignoring the angry looks.

“It’s hard to impress someone with the absence of a negative,” Felassan said without looking over. “Look, you say, did you notice how nobody came into your house and beat you to death for not bowing fast enough yesterday? You’re welcome!”

“It’s getting better.”

“Of course it is. *I’m* here.” As Briala chuckled, Felassan added, “And you’re doing good work. And the day when you can accept that they’ll never really understand, or appreciate it, or know just how much you did…”

“What?” Briala asked. “Is that the day it gets easier?”

“Mythal’s bosom, no!” Felassan chuckled. “Honestly, it makes your heart shrivel up and die inside you. Put it off as long as you can. Oh, your champion was in here not long ago. Gone now, though.”

He had stopped outside an ugly shack of a tavern, whose sagging wooden walls were covered with crude drawings and misspelled slurs etched in charcoal.

Briala nodded and stepped inside. It was empty, save for an elf behind the bar who glared as she came in. “We’re closed,” he snapped. “Cleaning up from last night’s brawl.”

She nodded absently and looked. The barman’s knuckles were white on the glass he was gripping too tightly. He’d either been paid or threatened to

keep his silence. Dark splinters from recently broken furniture were mixed in with the sawdust, and much of the sawdust on the floor was fresh, thrown down not long ago without time to soak up ale and dirt. On a table nearby was a trace of red.

“Looks more like it was just a few hours ago.”

“It was last night!” the elf at the bar said. He put his glass down and put his hand below the counter.

“Have you ever wondered how hot someone’s fingernails have to get before they melt right onto their fingers?” Felassan asked as he leaned against the bar, pulling his hood back slightly. “Because it’s something I’ve been thinking about *a lot* lately.”

The barman looked at Felassan’s tattooed face and went pale. He lifted his hand back from the counter very slowly.

“Thank you.” Briala moved toward the table and caught a trace of a sour, acrid scent. She occasionally used poisons in her work, and she recognized the hint of deep mushroom that suggested choke powder.

She looked at the barman, then at Felassan. “Come on.”

He nodded and led her outside. “Trap?”

“It looks that way. He was attacked by a group and then taken down with poison.”

“Poisons. Charming.” Felassan made a face.

“Yes, they’re so much less dignified than melting someone’s fingernails to their fingers.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” Felassan said, waving her words away. “The fingernail just turns black and falls off, and usually the finger swells up and bursts long beforehand.”

“I’ll bear that in mind, *hahren*. Can you sense where Ser Michel was taken?”

“Of course.”

“Good. I just need to make one stop, then.”

She led her mentor through a maze of alleys, ignoring the looks from shadowy figures playing games with dice and daggers and trusting to the

confidence of her stride to keep her safe, at least during daylight hours. She ducked into a crumbling stone building, its door unmarked. Inside, it looked no different from any other squatter's den, though it was empty at this time of day.

She found the right stone in the wall, pressed it gently, and felt the catch come free. Another stone in the wall, identical to casual inspection, fell open, revealing a drawer inside.

The bow Briala drew out was red cedar, good enough to be worth using, not so good as to draw attention. The daggers were silverite—more noticeable, but only if drawn. The arrows were coated with deathroot toxin, their tips sealed to keep the poison fresh until she needed it.

Felassan grinned. "You have a cache in every section of the city?"

"You taught me well." Briala closed the drawer, reset the latch, and left the building. "Let's go."

Felassan led the way, and soon they were in one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city. Dirty and cramped, it was the first section of the city to be home to the elves, the closest thing to a Fereldan alienage. They passed no humans on the thin and crooked streets any longer, and the elves who lived here would likely never even see the upper market.

Felassan paused as they came to a great tree in the market square. The *vhenadahl* was decorated with ribbons, and the dirt around it was marked with sticks stuck into the earth and decorated with bits of bright cloth hung as offerings.

"The tree of the People," Briala said.

"Your people."

"And yours." Felassan looked away. "Though you don't think so."

"It's a nice tree," Felassan said. "Let it just be a nice tree."

Briala was about to reply when the sound of booted feet and jangling armor came from around the corner, and without a word, both of them slid into the shadows.

The soldiers wore no coat of arms, but were fitted with red steel chainmail and longswords. "Too expensive for common thugs," Felassan

murmured as the men filed into a warehouse at the edge of the square. “And not from your empress.”

“No. She’d send her men in full armor, or assassins in plain clothes. Gaspard’s men.”

Felassan nodded. “Well, this is good news.”

Briala looked over. “I’m not entirely certain if you’re being serious.”

Felassan rolled his eyes. “You don’t send that many mercenaries to carry a dead body, *da’len*.”

“Point taken.” Briala stood. The simple servant’s dress let her move, though she hadn’t planned on fighting in it. “Next time, I’ll have to leave armor in the safe houses as well.”

“Every safe house? What if you gain weight? Can you imagine replacing that many suits of armor?”

Briala let out a long breath. “Shall we hunt?”

“Let’s.” Without breaking stride, Felassan drew forth a stick from the folds of his cloak, and it twisted and grew like a living thing, until a moment later it was a mage’s staff whose head swirled with emerald light. Together, they entered the building at a run.

The warehouse was shabby even for the slums. Piles of old crates rotted on a dirt floor, still stacked high enough to turn the warehouse into a maze, though whatever they had held had long since spoiled and been forgotten. Stains on the ground and weapon scars in the wood told Briala that the building had become a meeting place for smugglers and a dumping ground for murderers, and the cold air carried the stale smell of unwashed bodies and cheap drugs.

Somewhere in the warehouse, metal rang on metal and men grunted in pain. Briala looked at the maze of crates, then scrambled up one makeshift wall. Moldy wood crumbled under her fingers, and the whole stack of crates swayed dangerously, but moments later she had reached high enough to look down upon the rest of the warehouse.

“I know you want to embrace your heritage,” Felassan called back to her as he darted into the maze, “but we don’t all climb trees. You’ve confused

us with squirrels again."

"Ass." Looking down, Briala saw that Ser Michel de Chevin was unarmored, standing over the body of the bard Melcendre with a dagger in one hand and a stolen longsword in the other. One of the enemy soldiers was down, but Michel hadn't been able to hold the doorway of the alley they'd had him in, and he was flanked. There were at least a half dozen men still on their feet, and Michel favored a wound on one side. "Left, then right!"

Felassan made his way through the maze toward Michel, following her directions, and Briala lifted her bow, sighted, aimed, released a breath, and released her first arrow.

It always felt good. She wasn't sure whether it was the rush of violence, real or imagined, or simply the thrill of being naturally gifted at something that even Celene had found difficult.

For a moment, she could almost follow the arrow as it slid through liquid air and sank into the throat of the man on Michel's left.

She was drawing again even as the first man fell and Michel's face went blank with shock. However surprised he was at the unexpected help, though, he was still one of the best living chevaliers. Without hesitation, he slid into the space where the dying man had stood, putting the wall of crates at his back.

As Michel parried a pair of high thrusts, Briala scanned the other men. One of them had turned to look for her. She fired, and the arrow punched cleanly through his chainmail and found his lung.

The others turned and saw her then, and she gave the biggest one a grin as she raised her bow for another shot. He stumbled back, looking for cover, and Michel stabbed the soldier in the knee, then sank his dagger into the man's throat.

"You turn your back on an Orlesian chevalier, dogs?" Michel shouted, kicking the dead man to the ground as the others stumbled back. "Face me in combat and die with more honor than you deserve!"

“Or don’t,” Felassan said as he came around the corner. He raised his staff, and a coiling tendril of blue light snaked out across the remaining men.

The air hissed then snapped with an explosion of frost, and the soldiers stood frozen in place, a sheen of ice glittering around them. One of them had been caught in the middle of a scream.

Felassan pointed his staff at the wall of crates, and a jet of green fire ripped through the crumbling wood. The entire stack shuddered, swayed, and then crashed down on top of the frozen soldiers with a sound like someone taking a hammer to a shelf full of fine porcelain.

“I could simply have shot them,” Briala said. Bits of frozen red skated and bounced around the great pile of rubble.

“Oh, probably,” Felassan said, spinning his staff.

Panting, Michel looked up at Briala in confusion. “I seem to owe the two of you a debt.”

“We can discuss it once you’re safely back at the palace,” Briala said, climbing carefully down from the crates. She’d torn her skirts, but there’d been no helping it.

At her voice, Michel blinked. “Miss Bria? Her Majesty’s handmaid?”

“What? No. That would be madness.” Felassan gestured, and his staff shivered and shrank down until it was a simple stick again.

“We need to get you out of here, Ser Michel.” Briala glanced at his wounded side. “Can you walk?”

“Of course.” He turned to one of the dead men on the ground and yanked a small dagger free from the man’s eye, then turned to the body of the bard Melcendre. He checked her pockets with quick efficiency, then rose. “Let us depart.”

The three left the warehouse. Felassan and Michel eyed each other speculatively, the chevalier and the Dalish mage. Briala was looking elsewhere.

“Why did they take you?” she asked as they came out onto the street. If anyone had noticed the sound of fighting inside, they were keeping it to

themselves. The elves in the square did their business around the *vhenadahl* and spared Briala and her companions not a single look.

“Melcendre said that Gaspard had asked her to get me away from the empress’s side today, and…” Michel looked back at the warehouse. “I regret that she succeeded.”

“How?” Briala stepped in until Michel stepped back. “How did she lure you here?”

“It is a matter of honor—”

“Shut up, Michel.” As he blinked, Briala stared at him hard. “You were drugged at the tavern, not the palace. You would not ignore your duty for something trivial, so she either threatened you or lured you with something. You found nothing on the body, so it wasn’t something she stole from you. A fake note from a friend, a family member?” He flinched, though he himself would not have even noticed the tiny flicker at the corner of one eye. “But I doubt any friend of the empress’s champion would be found in a tavern in the slums … and you have no living family.” The flinch again. *Family* was the key.

“I don’t answer to you, knife-ear,” Michel said, his stolen dagger clutched tightly in one hand, not yet raised. “If our mistress had questions, she would not send her handmaid to ask them.”

“No, you fool. She’d send her spy.” Briala turned to Felassan. “Knife-ear.”

Felassan stifled a yawn. “I was offended. Were you offended?”

“No. Because he has never called me that before, not when giving orders to the servants, not even when he was in a rush.” Briala smiled. “Which means he’s covering, trying to distract me. What is it, Michel? A scandal in your family history. No. Urgent news would not bring you away … Ah.” His face paled as she nodded in satisfaction. “Falsified family title. Comte Brevin must have seen something extraordinary in you.”

“Not his ability to hide his facial expressions, obviously,” Felassan said.

“When you’re used to wearing a mask, you forget to hide the little tells.”

“And I assume only nobles can join the chevaliers?” Felassan asked.

“You assume correctly. And what is more, falsifying a title is punishable by death.” Briala glanced down at Michel’s hands. “Commoner? No, not just that. He leaned a little too hard on *knife-ear*. Elven mother?”

“Be quiet,” Michel said, his voice barely more than a whisper. The dagger shifted into a fighting grip Briala recognized from years of knife training.

“Ease your grip on the dagger, Ser Michel. I doubt you could kill us both in broad daylight with nobody noticing, and let me assure you…” She gave him a hard smile. “Celene *would* notice my absence, and she would be *very* thorough in her investigation.”

Michel lowered the dagger, his hand shaking. “You’re worse than the bard.”

“The bard would have seen you disgraced and executed had you not killed her. Do you truly expect me to help complete her plan?” She pointed at him. “Gaspard threatens our empress. I will not leave her without her champion in such a time of crisis. Did Melcendre inform Gaspard of your past?”

At her words, Michel sagged and shook his head. “No. She wished to confirm it with me first.”

“Good. Then with her death, we are safe. And if Gaspard attempts something similar again, you will contact me immediately.”

Michel looked at her in disbelief, and then over at Felassan.

“I’d consider it,” Felassan said. “You didn’t handle it particularly well on your own.”

“And you will keep this secret?” Michel asked, his voice stiff and formal. He sounded like a man being ordered to his death. “Even from Celene?”

“On one condition.” Briala raised a single finger. “One day, I will ask you for something. And you will do it for me, whatever it is, if you wish your secret to survive.”

“One favor.” Michel spat. “You expect me to believe that?”

“One favor, yes.” Briala kept her voice cool. She could not pit her passion against his. A desperate man who saw his honor and his life endangered needed cool reason above all. “Any more than that, and you might decide it was worth it to simply kill me. I saw Melcendre back inside. She was dead before those soldiers ever arrived.” Michel grimaced, and Briala lowered her voice. “You have my word, as a *knife-ear,* that when you complete your favor, your secret is safe forever. Never written down, never whispered to a confidante. Not even Celene. One favor, however steep it might be, but no more than that.”

Michel hesitated, and Briala saw the ideas darting across his unmasked face. First the insulted pride, and then the questions. Could he trust her? Could he kill her now and ensure the secrecy of his past? Could he agree and then kill her later?

And finally, the twisted, bitter smile. “If Gaspard sends another bard,” he said, “I may need your help. We have a deal.”

“Good.” Briala might have told him that he could trust her, that he would not regret the decision. But despite his peasant blood, he had worn the noble’s mask for too long to believe those words. Instead, she turned to Felassan. “It would be safer if we could be certain that no evidence was found in the warehouse.”

Felassan nodded. “*Da’len*, I believe I can guarantee that no evidence will even be found *of* the warehouse. Always a pleasure, these little visits.” He walked back toward the warehouse, whistling merrily.

After an awkward moment, Michel beckoned to Briala. “Shall we?”

As they left the elven slums, the warehouse started burning behind them.

* * *

“I have to be honest with you, Remache,” Grand Duke Gaspard said as the coach stopped before the still-smoldering warehouse. “Today’s hunt made for a singularly disappointing day. I never thought I’d look to a trip to the slums to help improve it.”

The building was trash, like everything here in the elven slums. The oily black smoke had been visible across most of the city, and now that night had fallen, the remaining embers outshone the cheap torches set up around the square.

Gaspard stepped out of his coach, adjusting his coat with his good arm and squinting thoughtfully at the big tree in the center of the square.

Behind him, Remache, Duke of Lydes, stepped out as well. “And we are here why, precisely, Grand Duke?”

“I’m here because I had Celene’s champion tied up in that warehouse, with Melcendre sending self-congratulatory mysterious notes.” Gaspard started to point, then winced and switched to the arm that hadn’t been burned that afternoon. “And now he’s back in the palace, and I’d like to know why.” He chuckled. “And you’re here because I’m a widower, and you think your daughter would make a lovely empress.”

Remache smiled, then looked cautiously around the square, which seemed deserted. “I know you’re not afraid to get dirty, Grand Duke, but I would not have expected to see you digging through rubble.”

“No, I have people for that.” Gaspard whistled, and from the shadows came men wearing the masks and livery of Gaspard’s servants.

“No armor?” Remache asked as they approached. Behind them trailed an elf wearing a dirty, patched version of a tradesman’s leathers.

“Maker, no, armor would scare the poor knife-ears back into the shadows. I need them talking tonight.” Gaspard smiled as his men and the elf came into the pool of light near his coach. “Good evening. What’s your name, rabbit?”

“Sielig, my lord,” the elf said to Gaspard’s feet.

“Good man, Sielig.” Gaspard nodded to the burning warehouse. “Now, my men said that they’d pay good coin to any elf who could tell me what happened over there.”

“Yes, my lord,” the elf said, and swallowed. “That was my warehouse. I rented out the space to merchants who couldn’t afford the market district. A

woman—a human woman, a singer—she came and said that she needed to use it. She said that she was working for you, and—”

“No, she didn’t,” Gaspard said, his smile never faltering. “She didn’t say a word of that.”

The elf blanched. “I must have misheard.”

“You don’t even know who I am.”

“No, my lord.” He swallowed. “Anyway, I saw two elves come into the warehouse after your—after some soldiers who were working with the lady. I heard fighting, and then an unarmored man came out with the elves. They talked in the square, the three of them. The man was angry at the elven woman. She said something he didn’t like. The elven man just watched, and then he walked back into my warehouse, and it all caught fire, all at once.” The elf shook his head. “The elven man had marks on his face, like the old stories about the Dalish.”

“Dalish?” Gaspard asked, laughing. “You’re not telling me tales, are you, Sielig?”

“No, my lord! And the woman … her clothes were too nice. She and the man who had been held … I followed them out of the slums. I have a pass to the merchant district!” His eyes darted up to look Gaspard in the eye, glittering in the light from the warehouse, and he fished in his pockets. Gaspard waved him on. “They went through it. The elven woman threw away her bow. Red cedar, worth a golden royal or more, and she threw it away. Then they went toward the palace, and the woman put on a mask.”

“The elven woman?” Gaspard cocked his head and let out a breath. “Really. Don’t see many of those. Rabbit in a mask. Listen to me, Sielig. You’ve done well tonight. Now, I’m not going to give you gold, because giving you gold is just giving you a knife in the back. You know it, and I know it. But those men over there have some silver, and it’ll be more than enough to build you another warehouse.”

“Thank you, my lord.” The elf bowed deeply, and Gaspard’s men led him away.

“Are you actually going to pay him?” Duke Remache asked beside the coach.

“I am.” Gaspard turned to his future grand duke and smiled. “Knife in the back would be safer, but you have to guess we’ve got a dozen of those big, glittery eyes on us right now, and they’d know. Right now, I’d rather they see the man who helped rebuild the warehouse the empress’s people burned down. I might need them later.”

Remache nodded, impassive behind his gold and silver mask. “You’re going to use the elves?”

“I can’t use whatever Melcendre had for me. Whatever it was, it like as not went up in that.” Gaspard jerked a thumb at the burning remains of the warehouse. “But a Dalish spy and an elven assassin both working for Celene?” Gaspard asked as he climbed back into his coach. “Maker’s breath, if I can’t find a way to use *that*, I don’t *deserve* the throne.”

5

In the slums of Halamshiral, whispers blew on the embers of rebellion.

Cruelty from the nobles was nothing new. Every elf in the city knew to look down when a human walked by. The elven women learned early on how dangerous it could be to travel alone, or to look too pretty. The elven merchants knew the fine dance of protesting enough that the nobles paid some of what they owed, but not protesting so much that their houses were put to the torch.

It was not loved, but it was known, and tolerated, and accepted as the way of the world.

Lemet's death was unacceptable.

Lemet had been a good man, his friend Thren and the other tradesmen whispered. He'd done honest work, kept his home clean, and even got business from the nobles' coachmen because of Lemet's low prices and kind, respectful manner. He had a slow temper and an easy laugh, and he bought drinks for his friends more often than not. Lemet wasn't gutter trash, they whispered, but Lord Mainserai's men had stabbed him, then hacked him apart and hung pieces of the body throughout the city like the worst kind of criminal. If they could do this to a *good* elf like Lemet, who never made trouble, what might they do to everyone else?

Lemet had died protecting a runner, the thieves whispered. Whatever he did to make his coin, he was a true elf at heart, and the *shems* who'd cut him down like a dog had been trying to tell every elf in the slums that they

owned those streets. It was past time the humans learned that there were always more rocks to throw.

Lemet had come from a night at the tavern talking about the old days, Jinette and the other true believers whispered. Whatever he'd said that night in the tavern, he'd heard of the time when Halamshiral was the home of the elves, before the humans broke the peace and invaded. He'd listened, and when the noble whose ancestors had burned the elven homeland to the ground tried to kill an innocent child, Lemet had stood tall against him. Could any elf do less?

Comte Pierre of Halamshiral, who had indulged Lord Mainserai's activities as long as no humans were hurt, ordered the patrols increased throughout the slums of the city. A group of elves returning home from a late night's work were harassed and beaten by the guards. The next morning, the guards were found dead in the market square, their ears hacked off in the manner used on elven bandits.

Comte Pierre sent his chevaliers into the slums to make an example. They killed ten elves who didn't have the sense to stay indoors and awoke the next day to find that someone had killed their stablemen and slit their horses' throats.

Lady Elspeth informed Lord Mainserai that his visits were no longer welcomed at her family's estate, as his uncouth behavior had so stirred up the commoners that Lady Elspeth's servants had been unable to procure fresh berries to make her favorite tarts. As he rode back to his estate, fuming, a thrown rock sailed through the open window of his coach and bloodied his nose.

The wiser nobles took an autumn holiday at their country estates. The foolish nobles increased their guards.

And quietly, slowly, the word began to spread from Halamshiral across Orlais.

* * *

For Celene, the weeks after Gaspard's failed gambits were sweet and quiet. She approved diplomatic documents, read reports, held audiences for inventors and artists who wished for patronage, and put into motion plans for a ball thrown in honor of the Divine, where she might speak with the nobles and make some headway in the tension between the templars and the mages.

There had been no word from the Divine's red-haired representative, though. No refusal, but no confirmation, either, and the silence twisted knots in Celene's stomach. She lay awake again, Briala curled up next to her on the side of the bed, watching the dawn.

What Orlais needed, she thought, was another Blight. Not that it would seriously help, and she would never wish such destruction upon her empire. But Blights were, if not easy, at least simple. Gather everyone who can fight, throw them at the darkspawn, and hope the Grey Wardens could destroy the Archdemon. Politics were put aside, eventually if not immediately—the stories surrounding Loghain Mac Tir's foolish betrayal of the Grey Wardens and attempt to seize power during the last Blight had been confusing at best, but even the savage Fereldan nobles had eventually banded together.

If darkspawn swarmed up from the Abyssal Rift and another Blight began, would Grand Duke Gaspard fall into line and bring his considerable military prowess to bear on an enemy that deserved it? Would the templars and the mages turn their fury to the darkspawn?

Celene sighed. As simple as it sounded, she knew that another Blight would rip Orlais apart far more brutally than any measure of infighting or civil strife. What was more, each Blight saw cultures destroyed and knowledge lost. No one built libraries in times of war. Her university, her class of nobles learning to think critically instead of mindlessly following in the steps of their fathers, the commoners and even the elves slowly making their way into the halls of learning … all of that would be put aside in the struggle to simply survive.

"You need to sleep," Briala murmured beside her.

“I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Don’t be.” Briala stretched, one arm trailing down Celene’s side as she did. “You could have woken me earlier.”

“Burdens of the empress,” Celene said, and smiled. Her lover’s skin was dark against the creamy white satin of her nightshirt.

Briala rolled onto her stomach and lifted her face, meeting Celene’s gaze. “Let me share them.”

“I don’t want you to share them, Bria.” Celene let her arm cradle Briala’s body to soften the words. “You are my eyes and ears already. I want this…” She pulled Briala close. “I want this for me alone. For us.”

Gently, Briala pulled out of Celene’s grasp and sat up, still facing her. “Your Majesty, you know that isn’t possible.” She took Celene’s hand, her fingers warm and strong. “Have you answered Remache?”

Briala’s eyes were so large and dark in the morning. It was like staring into an endless pool, soothing and deep.

“You know he now backs Gaspard,” Celene said with a sigh. They had both sworn long and loud the night after Gaspard made his proposal on the hunting trip and Briala saved Michel from the bard’s trap. Gaspard had failed on both fronts, but knowing that Remache was lost gave the victory a bitter aftertaste.

Briala squeezed her hand. “But can he not be turned back? If you answered him without acknowledging his change of allegiance, he might find ruling beside you more tempting than serving Gaspard. The fear of angering you by formally withdrawing his suit alone might compel him to __”

“I would lose you,” Celene said, and the words caught in her throat as she said them. “Bria, you’re all I have. All that is really me.” She pulled Briala in close, felt her warm arms come around her. The satin of Briala’s nightshirt slid against Celene’s skin like a cat arching its back to be petted. “Maker, I envy you sometimes.”

She knew immediately that she had said something wrong. She felt Briala stiffen, though her arms didn’t move, and Briala’s voice was light as

she said, “The empress of Orlais envies an elven handmaid?”

“You know what I mean, Bria.” Still holding her, Celene patted Briala’s back. “You could leave here, become someone else.”

“As long as that someone is an elf,” Briala said with a dimpled smile, but Celene knew she was still hurt.

“Yes, I know. But I … I was born to sit on that throne. I can’t do anything else. Since my parents and Lady Mantillon…” She trailed off.

This time, Briala pulled away. “You would make a wonderful scholar,” she said as she stood and pulled her robe on, “at least until Emperor Gaspard made a decision you found objectionable. Then, I believe trouble would ensue.” She smiled over her shoulder.

“You are probably right, my love.” Celene rose as well and pulled her own robe on, as if nothing were wrong. “And … I will consider Remache.”

Briala nodded and slipped her mask into place, then left through the passage behind the mirror, and Celene sighed and fetched her little magical pot.

She would be making her own tea this morning, it seemed.

* * *

Briala was in the market catching up with her contacts when Felassan came again.

“I did not expect to see you for months,” she said as he picked his way past a group of merchants arguing over a wagonful of goods and caught her eye. “This is a lovely surprise.”

Though her mentor’s cloak was as clean as always, untouched by the grime his constant wandering should attract, Felassan’s face looked drawn and tired beneath the shadows of his cloak. “As much as I miss the sight of your lovely masked face, *da’len,* I turned back for more practical reasons. What have you heard from Halamshiral?”

Briala followed him to the park where they had spoken just a few days ago. “Nothing,” she said. A pack of wealthy merchants’ sons were nearby, laughing and tossing a wineskin back and forth as they trampled the grass.

They sent leers her way, and she ignored them and kept her voice low. “My birds are overdue. They often come late in the autumn. I’ve heard nothing from the ships arriving from across the Waking Sea.”

He smiled wearily. “Well, then, I did not tire my ancient bones for nothing. Some foolish *shemlen* lord killed and brutalized an elven tradesman without cause. The angrier voices in the alienage are calling for *mien’harel*.”

The shock of it was so great that Briala laughed despite herself. “Over one tradesman? How many of our people are butchered every day?”

“We never know where the lightning will strike in the dry forest,” Felassan said as he sat down in the grass, “but I can smell the smoke.” He gave her the particulars, the name of the lord and the dead elf, for what little that mattered.

“So the elves will rebel? They’ll be crushed. This is…” She broke off and started to pace angrily. “Do they think this will *help* the empress? This is the last thing she needs!”

“The friends of the butchered tradesman will be heartbroken,” Felassan said. “I imagine they are constantly considering Celene’s needs.”

“They had better!” Briala spun on him. “She’s bending the Divine to her cause, she’s dealing with Gaspard … if this hurts her, do you think Gaspard will be *better* for the elves?”

“If there is one thing I have learned,” Felassan said, “it is that major political changes are almost never based on what *I* think.” He made an idle gesture. “What *you* think, on the other hand, might change how the Empress of Orlais reacts to this news. I can promise you that no one in Val Royeaux has heard this news before you.”

One of the merchants’ sons overthrew the wineskin, and it sailed over his friend’s head. Without missing a beat, Felassan took two steps, caught it, spun, and lofted it back without spilling a drop. The young men clearly looked offended that an elf had joined their game, but it had been a very good catch, and they had the good grace to laugh and nod.

“You’re right, *hahren*.” With an effort, Briala stilled herself. “Thank you.”

Felassan smiled gently. “Go.”

She made her way back to the palace, tugging her mask back into place and moving with unseemly haste through the wealthy district. Back inside, she made her way through the halls. The chatelaine saw her and called her way, but Briala ignored it. Whatever she had to pay later would be worth it.

She found Celene in a conference with a university administrator and, stealing a tea tray from a serving girl, entered with a bow. She served the tea with the grace of years of training, never interrupting the administrator’s charming requests for more funding and better clarification on how many commoners would need to be admitted to the university to please the empress. Celene gave Briala a single glance as she took her tea, sweetened with honey just as Celene had liked it since childhood.

Back out in the hall moments later, Briala shoved the tea tray at the serving girl without looking and paced the halls, thinking.

It had to be handled perfectly. Some would die in any event—Briala had learned that lesson on the day Lady Mantillon murdered her parents and all the other servants to ensure Celene’s safe rise to power. But the right words could save hundreds of lives.

Briala could not afford to spare tears for inevitable deaths. In that respect, she supposed that she was more like the nobles she served than the elves in the marketplace. The thought sometimes sickened her, but again, not as much as the thought of deaths she could have prevented.

Celene summoned Briala to the Stone Room a few minutes later and dismissed the other servants. She was standing by an open window, looking out over the gardens. The room had gotten its name from one wall, which was covered from floor to ceiling with differently colored pieces of amber. They formed a mosaic of the Grey Wardens riding their legendary griffons against a horde of darkspawn. The Wardens and their griffons were done in brightest gold, the sky was pale, and the darkspawn, led by the great Archdemon, were sooty red.

The rest of the room held trophies and other art of the legendary order, though none was as detailed. One great framed map dated back to the Second Blight and showed how far the darkspawn had spread at the height of their power, and in the corner an empty suit of armor held safely behind glass was said to date back to the Divine Age, when Emperor Drakon sent Orlesian armies against the darkspawn to save Grey Wardens besieged at Weisshaupt.

Celene gestured at a chair whose legs were carved griffon claws. “Whatever you find in the market can usually wait until the evening.”

Briala sat. “This cannot, Your Majesty. The elves in Halamshiral are angry. Lord Mainserai killed a tradesman without justification, and the elves are calling for *mien’harel*.” At Celene’s silence, Briala added, “It is an elven word. When the humans go too far, the elves remind them that even a short blade must be respected. They—”

“They will rebel,” Celene said, the words cutting through the chilly autumn air. “Against me. Now.”

“It is not rebellion, Your Majesty.” Briala bowed her head and took a shaky breath, clutching at the griffon-head arm of her chair. This was exactly what she had feared. “The elves of Halamshiral have never seen you. Their grievance is with neither you nor Orlais. They only wish justice for a man of your empire who died without cause.”

“What they wish is irrelevant.” Celene turned and stalked away from the window. “I am already fighting a war on two fronts. I cannot be seen to fight a war on three.”

“Then don’t.” Briala rose, putting herself in Celene’s path. “Give them justice.”

“A *lord* for the death of an *elf*? I … damn this thing.” With a quick jerk, Celene tore the mask from her face. Her face was flushed beneath, her eyes red from another night of little sleep. “Shall I declare the elves equal citizens before the Maker and the throne as well, while I’m at it?”

“Why not?” Briala took her own mask off, stealing a quick moment to steady herself. “Unless you don’t believe that, and I’m just a jumped-up

kitchen slut you haven't tired of yet."

Celene turned away, tossing her mask onto an overstuffed couch and stalking to the great amber wall. "You know I cannot do that, Bria. I might as well engrave Gaspard's initials on the throne."

Against the wall of gold and red, Briala's empress and lover looked pale and wan. Celene had always seen sleep as an enemy, or at most a necessary evil, from what Briala could tell, and since the events in Kirkwall the stress of rising tensions had her awake before dawn almost every morning. If it were early enough, Briala could sometimes coax her into lovemaking, and the warm and drowsy bliss afterward would let Celene steal a few more hours of rest. Lately, even that had not been enough.

Briala sighed. "I do know." Instead of going to Celene, she went to the small table where Celene's teapot sat, forever just shy of boiling. She poured Celene a cup of tea, brought it over, and gently touched Celene's shoulder. It was not quite an apology.

Celene turned, saw the tea, and sighed. "I do what I can, Bria. I have pushed the nobles to help the elves." She took the saucer, lifted the cup to her lips, and inhaled slowly. Briala saw the set of her shoulders ease ever so slightly.

"I know. You have done more than anyone since Andraste herself granted us Halamshiral."

"Sadly, I do not believe it within my power to grant the elves Halamshiral at the moment," Celene said with a tiny smile.

Briala matched her smile, and took Celene's hand. "I will table that suggestion, then." Gently, respectfully, she led Celene to the overstuffed couch and pulled the empress down beside her. "The throne cannot bring this Lord Mainserai to justice, and the elves will cause you nothing but trouble for it. So let me help." She took a breath. "Send me to Halamshiral."

Celene was silent for a moment. Her hand went still in Briala's grasp. "You will kill Mainserai?"

Briala nodded, confident and businesslike. "I have the contacts to lead the elves. I can give them the blood they need, then gentle them before they

think to turn to another target. It will be an unexplained crime for the city watch, not a rebellion, and if anyone asks your opinion, you can suggest that a lord who is so uncouth as to kill a harmless creature should learn to look to his own defense."

Celene reached out, gently, and put a hand to Briala's cheek. She leaned forward, and when they kissed, Celene's arms went around Briala, fiercely tight.

Then she stood, picking up her mask and sliding it back into place as she did, and walked slowly to the window, silent the whole time.

"Clean and quick, Bria," she said.

"Your Radiance." Briala bowed and left to pack her things.

* * *

Empress Celene slept alone that night.

It wasn't as though Briala visited every night, of course. On some nights, Briala's duties kept her up late working, and when Celene visited another lord's estate, discretion kept them in separate beds.

But it had been some time since Briala had been away.

She woke up before dawn each morning, cold and alone, watching the darkness outside the window as though if she stared hard enough, she could see all of them. The mages, the templars, the elves, even Gaspard and Remache and whomever else Gaspard had turned. They all lurked outside the palace, creeping closer each night as she slept, waiting for her to make the mistake that let them attack.

Each morning, she made her tea, drank until the headaches faded to a distant buzz at the back of her head, and poured herself into old books of interest to nobody but scholars.

She passed the next few days quietly, listening to speeches and accepting gifts. News of the elven uprising in Halamshiral reached the ears of Val Royeaux, and the assembled nobles and courtiers shook their heads and grumbled about the spoiled elves of Halamshiral not knowing how good they had it compared to Ferelden and the rest of Orlais, where they lived in

the alienages. Comte Pierre sent apologies for the shameful behavior of his city and made it clear that he would have the matter under control shortly, which left nobody satisfied. The nobles of Val Royeaux asked what Celene would do, and Celene gave polite non-answers and silently wished Briala a swift journey.

She attended a performance at the Grande Royeaux Theater three days after Briala's departure, and that was when she discovered how far things had gone.

The Grande Royeaux had been established almost two hundred years ago. It had a reputation as the greatest theater in the empire, with the most famous performers, the most distinguished playwrights, and the most extravagant sets and effects—including, at some performances, smoke and flame conjured not through an alchemist's powders but by a mage who had obtained permission to come from the Circle and lend his expertise. As a result of having to constantly outdo its competitors, however, the Grande Royeaux had also come to the attention of both the Chantry and the throne for performances that bordered on the scandalous. Mad Emperor Remille had restricted the theater to wordless pantomimes for fear that plays would somehow foment rebellion against his rule, and Celene's uncle, Emperor Florian, had nearly shut the Grande Royeaux down altogether after one tasteless play made light of the Orlesian occupation of Ferelden.

Celene had made a point of supporting the theater, financially and politically. She had pushed back against Chantry complaints, and on occasions when a play referenced her, either literally or metaphorically, she was always seen to laugh or applaud appropriately, a cultured empress with no concern for what might be said of her on the stage. In return, the playwrights of Orlais had always been kind.

Her coach stopped before the main entrance, by the lush carpet rolled out to signify that one of the grand nobles had deigned to attend the performance. Outside, the crowd stood at a respectful distance.

"Orders, Majesty?" Michel asked. He had been quiet but vigilant since Briala had helped him escape Gaspard's trap, eager to redeem himself for

his perceived failure. He had haltingly tried to apologize at one point, as Briala had suggested he might, and Celene had quickly silenced the conversation, making it clear that Ser Michel was blameless in the matter.

Now was not the time to have a champion who did not believe in himself.

“Observe, as always.”

Ser Michel nodded and stepped out of the coach, then turned and extended a hand to assist her. Outside, servants who had ridden atop the coach quickly swept dust from the lush carpet and pushed back commoners and lesser nobles as Celene stepped down.

Something was off in the crowd. She felt it instantly. They bowed, of course, but the tenor of their murmurs was wrong. As Ser Michel escorted her inside, with servants carrying the long train of her dress and spraying rosewater into the air before her so that the smell of the crowd would offer her no offense, she watched from the corner of her half-mask and listened as best she could.

“… don’t see her…”

“Wouldn’t be here…”

Inside, Celene accepted a bow from the current owner of the Grande Royeaux Theater, a plump woman who had put her merchant family’s money to good use. Tonight, the woman wore a simple but fashionable gown embroidered with a laughing mask on one side and a weeping mask on the other, and thick tradesman’s makeup just close enough to Celene’s to honor the empress without attempting to imitate her. Beneath the makeup, however, the lines on her face spoke of worry.

Celene would have given anything to have Briala there. Her handmaid and lover was even better than Celene at pulling facts together from the smallest observations, and she could go places Celene could not, invisible in her servant’s mask. As it was, she smiled politely as the theater owner led Celene to the royal booth, a richly decorated box that offered Celene and her guests a beautiful view of the stage, while offering the crowd a beautiful view of their empress.

One of Celene's servants poured her tea, while another laid a purple velvet cushion down on Celene's seat—no matter how nicely decorated the royal booth was, it would not do for an empress to sit on what still amounted to a wooden bench. A third servant sprayed rosewater into the air until the smells of sweat, salted food, and theater smoke were banished to satisfaction.

"I believe I will take wine tonight," she said to the servant with the teapot.

"Yes, Your Radiance."

"While you fetch it, please send my compliments to Mademoiselle Archet upon the lovely new curtain. Also…" Celene squinted thoughtfully at the lamp on the wall. "Take another girl with you and find fresh candles. I do believe these are guttering."

"Yes, Your Radiance," said the servant, and left with another.

The candles were doing no such thing, and Celene rarely took wine at the performances, and her servants knew both of these things. They also knew that Celene would want them to listen to the crowd, ask polite questions, and find out what was happening. None of them had Briala's skill, of course, but one did not personally serve the empress of Orlais without knowing how to play the Game.

The play, which had been billed as a romantic adaptation of the story of Andraste, started shortly thereafter. Andraste was played by a lovely young woman with blond hair. She began her rebellion against Tevinter enthusiastically, though Celene found her performance to be more excited than intelligent. Celene had studied the historical texts, even the forbidden ones, and she suspected that Andraste had been much more political than the idealistic believer presented by the Chantry. Wars didn't get won otherwise.

A quiet knock at her door made her turn. Michel rose and opened the door, then turned to Celene. "Duke Remache of Lydes, Majesty."

"Show him in, Michel."

Duke Remache stepped inside and bowed. “Your Imperial Majesty. I saw that you were in attendance, and if it is not presumptuous, I hoped that my own unworthy company might be welcome.”

She bade him sit with a graceful flick of the wrist. “If it is not to the detriment of your own companions, I would be pleased.”

He nodded and sat in the chair beside hers. Michel quietly stood at the back of the private booth.

“For though Tevinter’s mages rule, we see, ’tis better magic serve on bended knee!” Andraste proclaimed down on the stage.

“An odd performance,” Celene murmured. “I expected a romance or a tragedy, but this?”

Remache glanced at her. “And what do you think it is, Your Majesty?”

“I would suspect a comedy, but even the Grande Royeaux would not do that to the life of Andraste.” Celene smiled. “Although it might be the first recorded Exalted March on a theater.”

Remache laughed quietly.

Down on the stage, Andraste was convincing the rebels to ally with the elves. *“Against such magic, how can freedom reign? Our forces thus arrayed will not suffice! But with sweet justice as our own refrain, the elves shall come to aid us … once or twice!”*

The crowd laughed nervously, and Celene saw the darkness below lighten as hundreds of faces turned up to look at her.

Shartan, the heretical elven warrior whose story of joining Andraste’s fight against ancient Tevinter had been stricken from the Chant of Light, had walked onto the stage.

He had been cast as a woman, and *she* was wearing a dress, her hips swaying with comic exaggeration and her wooden prop ears huge, so that even those at the back of the room could tell that she was an elf.

She kissed Andraste’s hand, and the crowd whistled.

Celene felt the world go still around her. The back of her neck tightened, and she held herself motionless.

After a moment, she said, “I had thought to bring up a matter you had proposed earlier, Duke Remache.”

“I am not certain I recall any matter that requires further discussion, Your Radiance.” He did not take his eyes off the stage as he said it, and he was smiling as he watched.

“I see. I would so hate to ruin your enjoyment of the performance,” Celene said. “Tell me, do you see many?”

“Only those I have paid for myself.”

“It would appear that Gaspard paid for this one,” Celene said, keeping her face from betraying any emotion that the crowd might see from below. “With a feather.”

“Oh, I am no chevalier to care about fencing with feathers,” Remache said, still not looking over, “but Gaspard cares greatly for the hunting in Lydes, while for you, it seems merely an obligation.”

Down on the stage, Maferath waved his arms in outrage, the lone force of reason as Andraste and Shartan flirted and teased and completely ignored the war with Tevinter. *“When rulers to their hearts become a slave, ignoring duty to cavort with elves, does any heart so noble and so brave not see the need to take the fight themselves?”*

“Am I to understand,” Celene said without looking over, “that Maferath will be the *hero* making the necessary sacrifice by betraying Andraste?”

“Well, in this version of the play, Andraste seems to have taken an elven lover and forgotten her duty, Your Majesty.” Remache paused. “Still, I wouldn’t want to spoil the ending.”

“I know *one* ending. The playwright will be executed,” Celene said. “Possibly the theater owner as well.”

“To be fair,” Duke Remache said, “this last-minute change to the script was something of a surprise to the theater owner, as was the disappearance of her son … though I assume the lad will be found safely later tonight.”

“And what evidence will I find leading back to you, Remache?”

“None, Your Radiance, though I will make lavish donations to the Chantry in apology for a play I sponsored being undermined by some sick

heretic.”

Celene stood. “Tell Grand Duke *Maferath* that I seem to have lost a wager on whether he was literate.”

Ser Michel opened the door, staring daggers at Remache, and Celene left, ignoring the murmurs from the crowd below.

She kept herself steady until Michel closed the door behind her. Then, when she was alone but for Michel and her servants in the darkened hallway, she lowered her head and took a deep breath.

They knew. Damn them all, they knew.

It was still possible that it was merely meant as metaphor, an attack upon Celene for letting elves into the markets and the university. But she did not think so. Duke Remache had said “an elven lover” very specifically, and such a thing, even through the metaphor of the stage, was not said in the Game unless one was certain.

Briala, the one part of her life she had kept as her own these many years, was being used to attack her. Gaspard and his thugs would take away that one comfort, the woman she loved, so that he could get the damned war he wanted.

“You have used your throne to defend the arts and scholarly sciences for so long,” a soft voice came from the shadows. “It seems so cruel for Gaspard to use them against you now.”

Celene looked over at the Divine’s red-haired representative, conspicuous with her Fereldan features and her unmasked face. “The theaters have always been fickle, Leliana. And I do not believe that the university has turned.” She looked at Michel. “Get the other servants and find out what they have heard. We are leaving.”

“Majesty.” Michel nodded and stalked off with the rest of her servants in tow, and Celene went into the shadows where Leliana stood.

She held up a tightly bound scroll. “Several of the professors have been asked to write papers about the elves. One will be saying that their large ears mark them as similar to rabbits, which means that they are simple prey animals, relying upon base instinct for survival and not to be trusted.

Another will claim that anyone fornicating with an elf is insulting the Maker, as one who lies with animals."

Twenty years of fighting to bring an empire of savages the grace and culture it needed to remain the greatest country in the world, and now the very people she had sought to help mocked her, threatened her with death, and played up her battle with Gaspard for the amusement of the commoners. Twenty years of relative peace, enlightenment, and safety for Orlais would be cast aside because playwrights and scholars could snidely reduce it to the foolishness of a love-struck girl cavorting with an elf.

Celene shut her eyes. "And what does the Divine think about this?"

Leliana smiled. "The Divine has never had a very high opinion of the theater, Your Radiance." At Celene's silence, the Divine's representative sighed. "The elves are the children of the Maker, just as we are, and just as deserving of His grace."

"But the Divine will not say that," Celene guessed.

Leliana looked away. She had been trained as a bard, so every movement she made was likely deliberate, but Celene thought that her discomfort was genuine. "I have … been comrade-in-arms with elves. I would not see them harmed. But you did not ask for her support in that matter." She looked back at Celene. "You asked for her support calming the templars and the mages."

"Indeed." Celene nodded. "And will she give that support?"

Leliana let out a breath. "She will," she said, nodding slowly, "but in return, she needs to know that this matter with the elves is under control."

Celene felt her heart break inside her, for all that she had known within moments how the conversation would go. She breathed a tiny sigh, and then said, "Of course. I could hardly ask the Divine to keep her affairs in order were I not willing to do the same myself. I hope you enjoy the coming ball in Justinia's honor. I fear I will not be able to attend in person."

"The Divine understands," Leliana said, and in a soft, sad voice, added, "Walk with the Maker's blessing."

"Majesty!"

Celene looked up sharply and took a steadying breath as she pulled herself upright. It was Ser Michel, with Celene's entourage close behind him. The two servants she had sent out to investigate earlier looked disheveled. One of them had had her makeup smeared across her jaw and mouth, as though she had been slapped. The other had streaks just below her half-mask, as though she had been crying.

"What have you found?" she asked, glancing into the shadows. Leliana had disappeared.

"As you saw in that play," he said, grimacing, "the crowd is saying that you are too … lenient with the elves." Celene waved in irritation, and he went on. "They claim that you tax them less, that you wish to let them run free from our laws. They say that you pity them, and some were speculating that you might have made secret deals with the Dalish to strip nobles of their lands and return the Dales to the elves. There is even talk about your Briala." Michel looked at the wall. "They say she is, ah, that the two of you are…"

"The word is *lover*, Michel."

"Yes, Majesty. That is what they are saying." Michel's fists were clenched at his sides. "If you like, I would be happy to return to the lobby and make it clear that such talk is unacceptable."

Celene smiled and straightened. The servants needed to see her strength now. "No. That would silence one voice and give rise to a hundred whispers in its place. If the people fear that I am softhearted for the elves, it will take action to disabuse them of the notion."

There were countless options, but she had discarded all but a few immediately. New trade restrictions, or revoking her request to the university to admit the elven scholar … those actions would convince a few, but they would not sweep across the empire, leaving no doubt of Celene's strength.

For that, only one thing would suffice. She had known it while talking with Leliana, and in her mind, she begged forgiveness for the pain she knew Briala would feel. But there was no other way.

“Gather our forces. We march on Halamshiral.”
“Empress?”
“I have a rebellion to crush.”

6

Thren had learned a lot from the thieves in the weeks since the bastard *shemlen* had killed his friend Lemet.

First, he'd learned that most of the laws he feared so much could be walked around with laughable ease. Elves in Halamshiral were forbidden to carry any blade longer than the palm of their hand, but half of the elves in the thieves' guild wore blades at their hips for all to see, a dare to any guardsman with the courage to start a fight.

Second, he'd learned that his job at the tannery put him in high regard. With the leather scraps he stole, he could make slings for rebels who otherwise had nothing. Arrows and bolts could be hard to come by, the thieves told Thren, but even the damned *shems* couldn't keep the elves from getting their hands on rocks. What was more, when the rebels came to Thren with leather skins, he showed them how to boil them and shape them into armored plates and greaves. They weren't pretty, but they might turn away a blade or slow down an arrow.

Third, he'd learned, much to his own surprise, that he *really* liked killing humans.

The wagon had reached the traders' square just past sundown. It was a marketplace used mostly by craftsmen and merchants hauling food, not as fancy as the one in the protected upper part of Halamshiral, but several steps cleaner and prettier than the one in the slums where the elves lived. Simple sheets of canvas were hung to make stalls around the square itself,

painted brightly with dragons and chevaliers, and in the middle of the square a raised platform gave bards or other performers a good place to earn a few coins.

The human guards had searched the wagon, grunting, then warned the driver to be quick about unloading his goods. The filthy elves had been thieving more as of late, they said, and even the good parts of the city weren't safe.

Thren watched and listened from a rooftop across the square, then passed a signal to the runner Lemet had died to protect. The child shot Thren a smirk, then scampered off.

Thren counted to one hundred, then stood. He dropped a stone into the sling, spun the leather strap at the wrist, and let it fly. The stone hurtled across the square, lost to view. Thren saw the guard stumble back, clutching at the shoulder of his chainmail as the clank of stone on metal carried back to Thren's ears.

More slung stones followed, from all over the square. Merchants ran screaming as the stones fell like hail, rattling and clacking on cobblestones and armor and flesh, and the guards spun, raising crossbows and squinting in the twilight for targets. The horses bucked and screamed, and their driver fought to keep them from bolting. Thren spun his sling and loosed another stone, then swore. He'd only been practicing for a few weeks now, but he could tell as soon as it left his hand that it would go wide.

A sharp buzz snapped past Thren's ear, and he felt the wind as a bolt hissed past his face, cracking into the wall of the building behind him. A few weeks ago, that would have had Thren cowering on the ground in terror. Tonight, he bared his teeth with a feral grin. A moment later, the guard who had fired at him fell to his knees, bleeding from the face.

The square was almost empty. The guards were on the ground, dazed if not dead, and it would be a few precious minutes before reinforcements arrived. One of the thieves yelled out a command, and Thren swung over the side of the rooftop, then dropped to the ground. He landed awkwardly,

his ankle rolling under him as he landed. Swearing, he scrambled back to his feet and kept moving with the rest.

He tucked his sling back into his belt and pulled his knife free as he and the other thieves strode boldly into the square.

“Please! Please, I have a family!” A merchant had dropped to his knees, his head bloody, and scrambled out of the way as Thren approached. Thren cuffed him on the head, grinned at one of the other elves, and kept going.

The guard who’d fired a bolt at him was still on his knees, shaking his head. Thren walked up behind the man, grabbed him by the shoulder, and slid his dagger up under the jaw and across the man’s throat. The guard fell, gurgling and clutching at his throat.

He’d hesitated, the first time he’d killed a guard like that. The guard had gotten his own knife out, and one of the more experienced thieves had saved Thren’s life, then jeered him loudly for the rest of the evening. The second time, Thren had lunged in with the mad awkward energy of a young man in a woman’s bed for the first time, and he’d ended up stabbing the guard up under the ear. It had taken the poor bastard minutes to die, and Thren had been too nervous to retrieve his dagger until the man stopped moving.

The third time, though, Thren had gotten it right, and in the weeks since, many more had followed. One smooth motion, not jerky, not too fast, was all it took to make the human guard who’d sneered at the elves for so long a corpse on the ground.

Elves were already beating the wagon driver, who was curled up on the ground. Thren ignored them and joined the ones checking the wagon.

“Food and cooking pots, most of it,” said one of them as Thren approached. “Some lamp oil.”

Thren nodded. Lamp oil would burn, and cooking pots could make weapons.

“What do we take?” asked another one. “No time to get all of it.”

Thren looked at the horses, which were whinnying in alarm and pulling at their harnesses. “We take it all. Who here can drive a wagon?” At the

silence, Thren frowned, then turned to the elves beating the driver. “Get him on his feet!”

They groused but did as Thren ordered, pulling the wagon driver up. He had a bloody nose and stood in a crouch, curled around himself in pain, but nothing looked broken.

“You want to live, *shem*?” he asked, keeping his voice hard. “Drive the wagon where we tell you, and you’ll walk out alive.”

The man took a breath and coughed. “What about the horses?” he asked.

Thren laughed. It came out louder than he’d intended. The heat of the fight was still on him. “You’re not really in a good place to bargain, human.”

The driver took another breath, wincing. “No, I know. But you’re not going to kill the horses, right? You’ll treat them well?”

Thren looked at the other elves, who shrugged. “We had no plans to hurt them.”

“All right,” said the driver, and limped to the wagon. Thren waved to the rest of the thieves, and they grabbed what they could and ran. Thren and a few others joined the wagon driver and led him back into the slums. The square behind them was silent but for the groans of the merchants they’d left alive.

At Thren’s orders, the driver pushed the horses. They reached the barricade that the elves had set up around their little corner of Halamshiral, and with a great shout, the elves pulled aside tables and planks of wood along one wall so that the wagon could pass.

The horses whinnied in alarm at the sharp planks that jutted from the side of the barricade, bits of garbage turned into a makeshift wall against the humans, and the driver barked at them and cracked the reins, then shot Thren an apologetic look. Thren ignored him.

The elven slums had changed in the past few weeks. Every block had a building or two that was blackened from a punitive visit from the guards. The markets had boarded their doors, and instead of horses and cooking food, the slums now smelled of smoke.

But for all that, Thren saw happiness, too. An elven girl ran alongside the wagon for a moment, and one of the thieves tossed her a stolen apple. When the humans had decided when and how the elves ate, that girl might have starved. Now, when the humans cut off supplies as a punitive measure, the elves fought for every bite … and they ate better.

The headquarters for the elven rebellion was the tavern where Thren and Lemet had gone drinking on that fateful night. Now, most of the tables had been taken out back and chopped up for wooden shields, and the sawdust on the floor was stained with blood from injured elves who lay on pallets near the old bar. On one wall, the elves had drawn a map of the city in charcoal, noting possible targets, escape routes, and places to hide. Thren hopped down from the wagon, wincing at the ankle he'd twisted in the fight, and left the others to unload it. Jinette, still wearing her server's apron, waved him over, her lips pursed with nervous tension.

"Be careful," Jinette said, wiping her hands nervously on her server's apron as Thren came inside. "They're dangerous."

Thren didn't need to be told. The elven woman sitting on the bar before him wore better armor than he'd ever seen. It was leather, but blue as the Waking Sea and trimmed with silver studs, and she moved as if it weighed no more than linen. The bow slung over her shoulder was made from a wood he didn't recognize, with a fine whorled pattern along the curve that reminded Thren of leaves, and the daggers at her waist shone with the blue-white glitter of silverite. There was more coin hanging from that elf than Thren had made in his entire life.

But the elven man next to her was even more terrifying. His cloak was simple, as were his breeches and tunic, and his feet were bare. He could have been a beggar, except for the glowing staff he held, and the intricate pattern of tattoos that marked his face. The staff marked him as a mage, not safely locked away in a Circle tower but standing right in the warehouse with no templars to stop him from doing whatever he wanted. The tattoos marked him as a legend.

“*Hahren*,” Thren said haltingly, remembering the old words, “honored elder. Have you come to help us fight for freedom?”

“We have come,” said the elven woman, “to stop you from getting yourselves killed.”

* * *

Empress Celene’s forces moved toward Halamshiral at a grueling pace. They had crossed the Waking Sea by ship, then made their way through Lydes. It meant that Duke Remache’s servants would have a full view to report back to their master, and through him, to Gaspard, but there was no helping it.

And in truth, she did not *want* to help it. Gaspard had driven her to this, thinking himself clever in forcing the Empress of Orlais to crush a rebellion and prove that she was not to be trifled with. Let the nobles see what she would do once spurred to action, and let them never again mistake reluctance for war with inability to safeguard the empire.

While her forces—a few hundred horses, twice that in footmen, and two-score chevaliers—rode or marched, Celene sat in the royal coach, reading intelligence reports and wishing she could be riding. She wore a gown fit for travel, and her mask lay on the seat beside her, to be worn if she left the coach.

Riding would obviously be far more uncomfortable. Though Celene spent time on horseback regularly, a gentle ride in the park or a few hours hunting were nothing compared to spending all day in the saddle, and she knew it.

But in the saddle, she would simply be riding. She would not spend all day reading reports. How many blocks of the slums had the elves taken? How many guards were dead? How many nobles had changed their plans because of this threat to the city?

In the coach, she had nothing else to do but read, give orders, and wait.

Ser Michel was inside with her, impassive as she glared at the pages.

“News, Majesty?” he asked as she crumpled a note into a ball.

“Nothing new, Michel.” The elves had taken a few more blocks. They now encroached into streets where the poorer humans lived, and they had driven out those poor peasants with whatever they could carry. Elves in Lydes were reportedly fleeing their city to reach the *freedom* of Halamshiral, and the rebels in Halamshiral had left notes demanding that Lord Mainserai be given to them for justice. Halamshiral’s guard forces, often stripped bare to deal with more troubling areas, requested aid. “How long?”

Michel glanced out the window, squinting. “If we keep this pace, with minimal rest, less than a day. Though that has us arriving at Halamshiral tired.”

“They are elves, Michel. Their armor is scavenged from scrap metal and leather, and they are throwing rocks at the guards. This will be an easy enough battle, provided we arrive soon.”

He nodded without speaking, and Celene saw him frown. He looked more puzzled than concerned, which was a relief. She trusted Michel’s judgment in all matters of war, and if he were worried, she would be as well.

“Do you disagree, Michel?”

“No. Your pardon, Majesty.” He shook his head. “I wonder at their foolishness. To sneak out after curfew is one thing. To kill guards and raise barricades … what could they have been thinking?”

“They were hungry and afraid.” Celene shrugged. “Some nobles are cruel to the poor creatures without need. Even a dog will learn to bite if kicked enough.”

Michel raised an eyebrow. “You almost sound sorry for them.”

She smiled sadly. “I had hoped to solve this in a different way, Michel. The elves belong to this empire. They have their place in it, as surely as you or I, and it is my duty before the Maker to provide them guidance, safety, and comfort. What I do now, I do with a heavy heart.” She looked to him curiously. “And you?”

His expression didn't change. "They have threatened your rule. I would sooner put down a few hundred knife-ears rather than allow Gaspard to endanger the lives of men."

"I have never seen such anger from you before, Michel." Something in her breast twinged, loyalty to Briala, for all that she knew her lover would be brokenhearted at what Celene would have to do at Halamshiral. She thought of their last talk before Briala had left, of the passion in her lover's voice. "And it is unworthy of you, I think. The elves are peasants. We can no more appreciate the joys and hardships of their lives than they could ours. In their minds, we spend all day eating rare delicacies, and all night at grand balls."

Michel chuckled at that. "That is likely true, Majesty."

"They have not insulted you with this rebellion. You need bear them no anger."

"I know, Majesty. But as I said … they rebelled against you. Breaking a law, I can understand, even if all law is ultimately your law. But directly moving against you…" He shrugged. "I cannot understand a peasant, elf or human, willingly doing that. And I *must* react. If I cannot do that, then how can I claim to be your champion?"

Celene shook her head. "You will have your chance, Michel. I pray that we succeed."

They sat in silence, and Celene thought that tonight, again, she would sleep alone. But Gaspard would sleep with fear as his companion. Rebels though they might be, the elves were Orlesians, and their deaths demanded recompense.

Gaspard would pay.

* * *

Lord Mainserai's home in the city was almost a palace, a great estate set behind stone walls and spiked iron gates.

As the half-moon rose, Briala watched the estate from the shadows of the trees in a nearby park. The windows were dark, and the gates had been

closed for more than an hour now, any visitors having long since departed. The smoke coming from the many chimneys had largely tapered off, except for one end of the house that Briala had picked out as likely being the kitchens.

A few servants might be up and about, still, working in the kitchen or laundering linens for tomorrow, but most of the house had gone to bed.

Felassan leaned against a tree beside her, calm as always. The apparent leader of the rebellion, Thren, paced nervously behind them.

"You are certain that this is the way?" he asked for the third time.

"The *only* way," Briala said, trying to keep her voice calm. "Did you think you could burn buildings and kill guards with impunity?"

"No, but—"

"The empress will send the chevaliers into the slums and burn everything inside your barricades to the ground," Felassan said, still leaning against the tree. "That is, generally speaking, what empresses *do* when someone throws up a barricade and announces that they're rebelling."

"So if you want justice," Briala continued, "if you want Mainserai dead, then it needs to happen *now*, while the rebels cause a distraction across the city. And once he is dead, then you need to *stay quiet*. The guards need to see the elves behaving themselves perfectly tomorrow morning. No more raids, no more thrown stones, nothing but a polite smile and eyes down. Do you understand?"

"But…" In the darkness, Thren was just a gray blur of motion, but she could smell his sweat. "Do you think they'll just find his body and then shrug? What if they ride into the slums and demand answers?"

"They almost certainly will," Felassan said.

"And nobody will have seen anything," Briala added.

Thren stopped pacing and turned to them. "What if they kill elves in retribution?"

"They almost certainly will," Felassan said again.

"And you will keep your eyes down and your mouths shut," Briala said.

“But … but … you’re Dalish!” Thren turned to Felassan desperately. “Your people could reclaim Halamshiral for the elves!”

“Yes. Someday.” Felassan pushed himself off from the tree. “But not today. Today, you kill a noble and then hope all the other nobles think he was too great an ass to be worth avenging.”

“You don’t understand!” Thren’s voice rose in his anger. “People joined this cause because I told them about Lemet! Because of me! Now you’re saying that the best we can hope for is to have a few homes burned, a few elves killed?”

“I know it’s not what you wanted to hear,” Briala said, and Thren turned on her.

“Shut up! Don’t walk up in your fancy armor and your bath-scented skin and act like you know what we’ve been through!” He took a ragged breath and stalked away.

Briala let him go. When he was gone, she let out a slow breath and rolled the tension out of her shoulders.

“Well, I thought that went well. How about you, *da’len*?” Felassan asked behind her.

“He’s right.” Briala shrugged, watching the moon clear the rooftops. “I grew up serving Celene. However I was treated, it was more gently than if I’d been in the alienage. Maker’s breath, I live in the palace in Val Royeaux.”

“And it’s just been one giant holiday for you, hasn’t it?” Felassan’s hand came to rest on her shoulder. “Ah, wait, no, you spend all your time spying for the empress and urging her to help these elves in a hundred ways they will never notice.”

Briala nodded without answering. The words were true, but it didn’t tighten the knots in her stomach.

“Or … ah.” Felassan chuckled. The hand on her shoulder tightened, pulling her around. In the moonlight, his eyes were deeper spots of black. “You’re not sure which it is, are you? Are you really doing this to help save elven lives, or are you doing it to protect your empress?”

“The two are inseparable,” Briala said without hesitation. “I know that Gaspard would not be gentle with the elves, and I cannot put words in his ear.” She unslung her bow and stepped out from the trees, Felassan beside her. “This is the only way.”

Felassan grinned. “Well, good. Let’s stop moping and go kill a noble, then.”

Ahead of them, at the edge of the lawn, Thren waited. Briala looked at him, the elven crusader fighting for his dead friend, and asked, “Could the Dalish help these people?”

Felassan was silent for a long moment. “I doubt we’ll ever know,” he finally said.

“Why not?”

“Because,” Felassan said, “the Dalish will never see the point.”

“Are you ready?” Thren called over, forestalling any other question Briala might have asked.

“If you are.” Briala drew an arrow from her quiver. “Let us win justice for your people.”

Felassan crossed the road, his steps even and unhurried, and came to the stone wall of Lord Mainserai’s estate. It was twelve feet high, with foot-long iron spikes jutting out and down to deter would-be thieves, along with shards of broken glass set at the top of the wall.

Felassan laid a hand to the stone wall, closed his eyes, and let out a long breath.

A rumble started in Briala’s belly and worked its way to her ears, and they popped as the stones of Lord Mainserai’s wall shifted. The metal spikes shrieked, and loose rocks shot out from stonework with sharp cracks. The wall around Felassan sagged, as though it were a snow fort melting in the spring sun, and his hand glowed with pale green light.

Briala winced as one of the spikes, warped by the twisting of the rock wall beneath it, tore away and clanged to the ground. “I thought this would be quieter.”

“You thought wrenching metal and stone apart would be *quieter*? Really?” Felassan pulled his hand away. As dogs began barking all through the neighborhood, he added, “Shall we depart?”

Where he had cast his spell, the wall had sunk, until it formed a canyon just a few feet high. All around it, stone was stretched, the iron spikes jutting at irregular angles like some great monster’s teeth. Briala stepped gingerly over the gap, her bow raised.

Inside, the lawn was neatly trimmed, and hedges had been sculpted into the shape of dragons and griffons and other beasts. Past the lawn, the manor itself was elaborate and overwrought, its clean white columns lit magically to display bronze sculptures of Emperor Drakon fighting darkspawn. With Thren and Felassan behind her, Briala crept into the shadow of a majestic wyvern, and then darted across the lawn to take refuge beneath a griffon’s outstretched wings.

“Who’s there?” came a cry from near the house. Briala found the guard as he stepped out, looking at the wall in confusion. “What in the Maker’s name?”

Her arrow took him in the throat, and he died without giving cry. Then a second guard stepped out from behind a column, saw his comrade fall, and let out a full-throated shout.

Felassan flung out a hand, and a boulder the size of a wagon wheel tore itself from the earth and hurtled into the guard, smashing him against the stone column. He landed with his neck twisted unnaturally and didn’t move.

“Damn it.” Briala stepped out from the hedge. “They’ll be all over us in a minute.”

“Well, don’t blame *me*. I got mine.”

“We need to go, now!” She took off toward the house at a sprint.

She darted across the lawn, past a beautiful marble fountain where bronze nymphs cavorted, and up the staircase where the two dead guards lay. As she reached the top of the stairs, four guards rushed around the corner with swords and shields ready.

“For the elves!” came Thren’s cry from behind Briala, and a moment later a stone whipped past her and caught the lead guard on his breastplate, knocking him back onto his heels.

They were armed and armored, and they outnumbered Briala’s group four to three. Added to that, Briala knew that the longer they fought, the more attention they would draw.

It would have to be quick.

She ran forward, firing on the run as she did. Her arrows, one after the other, split the air and glanced off iron breastplates. Fired from a half-draw on the run, they lacked the penetrating power necessary to punch through armor, but the guards stumbled and flinched, and Briala’s *true* arrow was already drawing back as the guards fumbled with their shields. It took the lead guard in the leg, punching through armor, and he cried out and dropped to one knee.

The next guard saw an archer with no arrow in her bow and lunged in for the easy kill. She sidestepped and slid a dagger out of its sheath and up into his face in one smooth motion. He collapsed, shrieking, but Briala was already moving.

“Oh, you poor fools,” Felassan said from behind her, and Briala flinched as lightning played off the body of the guard coming at Briala from the other side. He cried out and shuddered, paralyzed in the coils of magic, and then fell, his breastplate smoking. “Always going after the one closest to you and forgetting about the one in the back who can light you on fire.”

Briala dropped her bow, drew a second dagger, and turned to the guard she’d hobbled first. He grimaced and swung at her, and she stepped back, then lunged in and finished him quickly, her silverite daggers slashing across his throat. She turned toward the last guard, only to see that it had been handled. Thren was cutting the man’s throat with what looked like a rusty butcher’s knife, favoring a small cut on his side. He saw her look and nodded once, face grim.

Felassan came up the stairs, his staff crackling with curls of green energy. “Go,” he said. “As your people drew the city guards elsewhere, I

will draw Mainserai's men out here." Without pausing, he leveled his staff at the guard Briala had blinded and finished him with a spear of emerald light.

Briala retrieved her bow and slung it over her shoulder. She doubted there would be much time for shooting in the close confines of the manor. She nodded to Felassan, then quietly pulled open the great bronze door and crept inside with her blades raised.

The lamps had been dimmed for the evening, and Briala squinted in the shadows. Her armor, soft drakeskin fitted specially for her slender frame, let her move as softly as if she'd been wearing a robe, and Thren moved with the quiet caution born in the slums.

She had been in enough noble houses to know the general layout, and moved confidently to the stairs. Thren trailed behind her. At the top of the stairs, shadowed hallways glittered as art on the walls caught the moonlight.

Ahead of Briala, a door opened with a tiny squeak of old metal, and a robed servant stepped out into the hall. She turned and saw them, and her mouth made a tiny soundless "Oh."

For a long moment, nobody moved. Briala looked at the woman—an elf, at least sixty years old, in a tattered robe that would leave her too cold in the winter. The knuckles on her fingers were swollen into knots, and her graying hair had come free from the bun she'd stuck it into, hanging around the papery skin of her face.

Wordlessly, the woman pointed to a room a few doors down. Then she gave Briala a tiny nod and backed into the room she'd come out of. The door closed softly, and Briala heard a lock click into place.

"And she serves him," Thren whispered, and shook his head. Briala moved toward the door, the soft leather soles of her boots making no noise on the carpeted floor.

Quietly, Thren pulled the door open.

The room inside must have seemed impressive to Thren, Briala guessed, by his shocked stare. To Briala, it spoke of someone with enough money to afford luxury, but no taste in how to spend it. Fereldan furs hung next to

Tevinter statues and sculptures from the Anderfels. A jeweled dagger was half-sheathed carelessly on a nightstand, and a painting that looked in the dim moonlight like an original Caliastri was hung on a wall that would see its colors leached by sunlight within a few years.

Lord Mainserai lay alone in a voluminous canopied bed, snoring softly. The lord evidently preferred to sleep in the nude.

Thren stared at the man who had killed his friend. “For crimes against Lemet and the elven people,” he began, and then broke off as Briala, who had never stopped walking in the first place, leaned over and slit Mainserai’s throat. “What did you … I wanted him to know!”

Briala wiped her blade on the sheets and glanced at the body. “I believe he just figured it out. Let’s go.”

Thren glared at her. “This was not your fight.”

“That’s why you needed me here,” Briala said, and sighed at his puzzled look. “I know what you’re feeling. I killed the noblewoman who killed my parents.”

That got Thren’s attention. “I thought you were just some noble’s spy.”

“No.” Briala peeked out of the bedroom, checking the halls. She heard no sign of inside guards, but it was best to be sure. “I am the *empress’s* spy.” And because it was not quite a lie, and because Thren needed to hear it, she added, “Empress Celene could not arrest Lord Mainserai without incurring the anger of the other nobles, but she wished to see justice done.”

She crept out into the hallway, Thren behind her. Both still had their daggers out.

“So she sends you to kill those who anger her?” Thren asked. He had the good sense to keep his voice down now that they were out of the bedroom.

“Yes.” Briala spent more time watching and listening than she did killing, but in the twenty years Celene had ruled Orlais, Briala had gotten her hands bloody often enough.

“Like the noblewoman who killed your parents?”

“No.” She paused at a thump from around a corner, then relaxed when she saw that it was just a cat making its nightly rounds. “That was for me.

And that is why you needed me here. When I went after the noblewoman, my need for vengeance very nearly got me killed."

They moved quietly back down the stairs to the front parlor. "Then I suppose I am glad you were here," Thren said behind her.

"As am I." Briala smiled.

She had done it.

Briala hadn't allowed herself to think it before, when she'd ridden into town with Felassan and seen the poor elves who fancied themselves rebels. They'd built a barricade that any chevalier would vault over and wore badly tanned leather armor that an axe or halberd would cut through like it was satin. In their naiveté, they had been talking about Halamshiral belonging to the elves again. It was heartbreaking to see them so proud over so little, unaware of how much trouble they had caused, or how close they had all come to death at the hands of the imperial army.

That army would have crushed them in hours.

If Celene had seen them in that moment, she would have withdrawn her permission in an instant, and Briala would have been hard-pressed to argue.

Briala wondered what Gaspard was trying to make of the elven situation. He was too opportunistic to pass it up, and too crude to come up with something truly clever. With luck, he'd be speaking of it as a dire situation that needed a firm hand, so that when the situation inexplicably vanished, he'd look even more the fool.

Through the still-open bronze doors ahead, the yard was quiet. Briala wondered if Felassan had dealt with all of Mainserai's guards, but it seemed bright outside. Perhaps he'd lit something on fire?

Briala came outside, and blinking past the glare of torches, she saw a dozen armored men on horseback ringed around her.

"In the name of Empress Celene," Ser Michel's voice rang out, "you are under arrest for the murder of Lord Mainserai."

For a moment, she thought she had misheard, but when her eyes adjusted to the brightness, she saw the tabards of the men around her, the golden lion on a field of purple.

She saw Ser Michel’s face, grim and resolute, and at her stare, he only nodded.

She had failed, after all.

Felassan was nowhere to be seen, though great hunks of stone had been torn from the formerly pristine lawn, and some of the marble columns were scorched, near crumpled bodies that marked more of Mainserai’s guards.

“I surrender.” Swallowing the bile that rose up in her throat, Briala dropped her daggers and held her hands up, showing her empty palms. The silverite blades struck the ground with a sound like glass breaking, though of course the blades themselves were fine. Several of the chevaliers glanced down at the sound, surprised that an elf would have such fine weapons. They would of course recognize the distinct sound, since all of them were nobles. Well, except for Michel, some dark and laughing part of her mind noted.

Celene had given them to her on the night she had come back to her in Val Royeaux. It had been the first night they made love.

“Traitor!” Thren yelled, and she couldn’t deny the insult.

He raised his knife with a wordless yell, and a dozen crossbow bolts tore through him. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Ser Michel dismounted and came forward with shackles ready.

“Ser Michel,” she said. “We do keep running into each other in odd places.”

He said nothing. His face was grim and set, and after a moment, she realized what he feared.

“No,” she said quietly. “I would not spend it so fruitlessly.” Even if he did hold to his word, the two of them versus eleven chevaliers would be a short and one-sided battle.

He still said nothing, but he nodded once, and the muscles of his neck relaxed slightly. It surprised her. It was unlikely that any of his fellow chevaliers would believe whatever claims she made there in front of the home where she had just murdered a noble, so if he was worried, it was

because he would actually have held himself to his promise. He was a more honorable noble than most *actual* nobles.

Michel turned her around, firmly but not roughly, and shackled her arms behind her. She let him escort her through the late Lord Mainserai's yard. The other chevaliers formed up around her, wordless. Briala was not sure whether they had been given orders to treat her gently or if the obviously fine armor told them that she was working for a noble and should not be casually beaten. She very much doubted the code of honor about treatment of prisoners would apply to elven assassins.

Her mind spun new fancies with every step. They had come here and demanded surrender. This hadn't been about stopping the elves, then—if it were, the chevaliers would simply have killed them. It was about Briala. That explained the light treatment.

Could they be with Gaspard, countering Celene's plan? Unlikely. Ser Michel would never have turned traitor, and while Melcendre had lured him out with blackmail once, he was still too ashamed to allow such a ruse to work twice. They had come from Celene. Had Gaspard done something to force the empress's hand? Had the Divine made a new demand? What had changed Celene's mind?

Then, as she came past the torches, Briala saw the night sky, glowing a sooty red.

She smelled the smoke of Halamshiral's slums burning.

After that, Briala stopped thinking.

* * *

By the time morning came, most of the work was done.

Empress Celene rode with her forces on her shining white mare, resplendent in royal plate that glittered even in the weak, smoky light of dawn. She ought to be tired, she knew. But even though she was up late this day instead of early, the dawn worked its magic upon her mind, keeping her moving.

The elves had heard the crash of armor as the army approached and had tried to form a spear wall, using sticks with knives and wooden shields made from tavern tables. The Orlesian army, marching four abreast in the narrow and winding streets of Halamshiral's slums, had cut them down without even pausing. When they reached an open square, the horsemen had swept out and around in clean flanking waves, butchering the elves as they tried to flee and terrorizing any who thought to gather themselves for a counterattack.

After that, Celene's greatest concern was troops losing discipline and turning the night's work into a celebration. The elves lived in these slums, Celene knew, and with nowhere to turn, they would be vicious if given the chance. She rode along, protected but present, and snapped orders to the men when they seemed inclined to rush into a building for easy looting.

They marched through the elven slums with military precision, and when they rode back out, the section claimed by the rebels was burning behind them.

The lords and ladies of Halamshiral were assembled in the upper market square outside the gates that separated the nobles from the peasants, waiting in silence as Celene and her forces returned. The nobles stood in front, with their bodyguards. The merchants and tradesmen and servants stood off to the side, holding buckets. It was a wise precaution. The heat behind Celene was a blistering curtain that tried to steal the air from her lungs, and sparks and embers drifted freely over the stone walls that kept the nobles safe.

Those stone walls, Celene thought, likely dated back to when the elves first built Halamshiral. She wondered if they ever imagined that one day, those walls would protect human nobility from the elves who burned on the other side.

Ser Michel was there with the assembled nobles. Though he hadn't fought this evening, he looked tired, and as he looked past her at the burning slums, his face gave away some of the sorrow he had tried so hard to deny back in the coach.

Celene rode to the front of her forces and took off her helmet. She was barefaced beneath it—a necessary concession given the armor—and her pale face met the crowd without flinching.

“All hail Empress Celene!” Ser Michel shouted into the silent square.

In the gray dawn light, a thousand voices called her name, and a thousand people dropped to their knees.

She sat and allowed it. This was the other reason she had ridden with the forces, wearing armor that she had never needed. They would call her cruel, to be certain. They might ask whether she had taken leave of her senses. But she had a thousand living witnesses who knew with undeniable certainty how Empress Celene dealt with rebellion.

The moment wanted a speech, but the words she had prepared didn’t fit, now that the stink of smoke from burning homes was caught in her hair. She turned to Comte Pierre of Halamshiral, ruler of the city, whom she had allowed to command the forces that razed part of his home.

“Comte Pierre,” she said in a voice that carried to the farthest reaches of the square, “my soldiers have traveled long without rest, and while this act of order was necessary, there was no joy in destroying even so humble a part of this fair city.”

There could be only one acceptable response, and Pierre knew it. “We thank you, Your Majesty, for making our home safe again, and we must again express our sorrow that such base villainy could grow in proud Halamshiral.”

“There will be work today,” Celene said, “and soldiers will not make it go faster. We will take our leave and retire to my Winter Palace, outside your fair city.”

It was a short march to the palace her family had traditionally retired to during the cold winter months, and even after a long night, it would be worth it. Her men would receive better treatment than Halamshiral could offer … and Halamshiral could begin burying its dead.

Pierre bowed from the saddle. “Your men are heroes all, Your Majesty, and we shall see that they dine as such. With your leave, I shall go now to

see to it that provisions are sent to your palace."

Celene nodded, and Comte Pierre rode slowly away, the crowd parting before him. Ser Michel mounted and pulled his horse up beside her, and together, they began the ride out of the city.

"Your duties, Ser Michel?" she asked, not looking over.

"Successful, Empress. A commoner who was with her resisted and was killed. She was taken without a struggle, as you requested."

"Thank you." The sky had lightened. The banners of the city were shifting slowly from gray to red. "How fares the prisoner?"

"She … did not react well to the fire, Empress."

"I see." Celene nodded, showing nothing even without her half-mask and makeup. There would be people watching from windows, waiting for a sign of weakness.

The sun had risen by the time Celene's forces passed through the city gates. Massive and thick, the gates were mounted on ancient stone that was said to come from when the elves had ruled this city. The walls of the city were so strong, according to history, that after the gates had been breached in the last great push of the Exalted March, the conquerors had left the fortifications otherwise untouched. It gave the city an unexpected exotic air, the guard towers rising with an ancient grace that was not altogether natural.

"And it is done," Celene said as the sound of her mare's hooves changed from the clop-clop of cobblestones to the dull thump of dirt road. "Gaspard's cursed gambit fails." And all it had cost her was a few thousand elven lives, and Briala.

Ahead of them, the first merchant caravans of the day already approached the city.

"It makes little sense," Ser Michel said beside her. "I have been so intent upon finding Briala that I have thought little of Gaspard … but he had to know how easily you could counter his false rumors about your sympathy for the knife-ears."

“Did he?” Celene shrugged, her fine armor squeaking slightly as she did. “He sees that I have never led an army in battle and thinks I lack the steel to do what must be done.” Or he had more whispers and innuendo waiting for her back in Val Royeaux, and she would have to cross blades with him again to quiet whatever little scandal he had prepared this time.

“No…” Michel frowned. “With respect, Empress, for all his buffoonery, Grand Duke Gaspard is a chevalier. He has trained in military strategy. He *should* have expected this.”

“You are right.” Celene yanked on the reins, pulling her horse up short. “He did.”

In the merchant caravan up ahead, caravan guards threw off brown cloaks to reveal the shining armor of chevaliers. In the grass, hundreds of bowmen rose from where they had lain.

As Celene turned to cry a warning to her forces, the dawn-gray sky filled with black arrows.

7

Back in the trees, well out of sight, Gaspard grinned as his archers opened fire.

Beside him, Duke Remache stood calmly by his horse, resplendent in full plate armor of gleaming silverite that had been enameled with his house's colors. "I'm surprised that the code of the chevaliers allows you to use such tactics."

"We're trained to fight with honor, Remache, not idiocy." The rain of arrows withered Celene's messy line. Soldiers exhausted from a long march and an ugly slaughter raised their shields a few heartbeats too late, and moments later, the cries of the dying sounded across the field. "The code is meant to guide us to a path of glory, not restrict our tactics. You understand the difference?"

"Not entirely, Grand Duke." Remache pulled himself into the saddle, ignoring a servant with his stool. "But then, I did not train with the chevaliers."

Gaspard mounted as well. His armor gleamed like Remache's, but his enamel had been stripped bare, and the silverite shone pure. "I will not assassinate Celene," he said, settling into the saddle. "I will not poison her or have some peasant with a crossbow fire at her from afar."

"But you will mount an armed rebellion against her."

The second wave of arrows clouded the sky. Celene's poor soldiers were still trying to pull themselves into a defensible formation.

Gaspard paused and looked over. “That’s putting a bit of a point on it, considering that you stand at my side, Remache.”

“Again, Grand Duke,” Remache said, “I am merely curious about the code.”

“You don’t like the chevaliers much, do you?” Gaspard asked. When Remache made no reply, Gaspard sighed. “When given direct challenge by a chevalier, I will answer without hesitation. I will not retreat without order from my commanding officer, and I will not kill a lord or lady outside the heat of battle unless it is a legal execution in the name of the empire. And I will not wear my family’s heraldry while I fight Celene.”

“I had wondered.” Remache gestured at Gaspard’s bare armor.

“To rise against the empress while wearing my family colors would shame House Chalons,” Gaspard said. “If I fail here, I will not let the empire think my house responsible for my actions. Only as Grand Duke, a member of the imperial blood, have I the right to challenge. Whatever other title I wear, I will win it on the field this day.”

“If you fail here, I doubt Celene will take the state of your armor into account when deciding what to do to your relatives,” Remache said with a smile.

Gaspard chuckled. “True. Fortunately, I had not planned to fail.”

He looked through the trees, where the rest of his mounted forces were waiting—some chevaliers, some merely nobles like Remache, and some lightly armored men-at-arms, not nobles proper. “Speaking of which … are they advancing?”

“Yes, my lord!” came a cry from a scout high up in the trees.

“Excellent. Coming out to protect their empress.” Gaspard held out a hand and took the lance that was offered.

“They should have fallen back into the city.” Remache shook his head and lowered his visor.

“Celene was riding near the front.” Gaspard grinned. “No chevalier would let his empress fall while he retreated to safety. Which leaves them out there for the taking.” He stood in the stirrups. “Sound the charge!”

The call went down the line. Gaspard lowered his visor, set himself in the saddle, and spurred his horse.

It was the noise that always surprised him. His focus, the entirety of the world, shrank to the enemy line ahead and the grassy field between them, with only the dimmest awareness of hundreds of his men spurring their mounts beside him. But the noise, the pounding hooves and clattering armor, thundered through the ground and up into his bones, even as his own panting breath echoed inside his helmet. He heard that crash of battle as he settled into his horse's rhythm, felt the stride, saw the distance to the enemy line, gauged the timing, and then launched himself perfectly into the moment of impact.

The shock of the blow blasted past his enemy's clumsily placed shield and punched through his breastplate. A killing strike, Gaspard noted with satisfaction. If the man wasn't crushed in the press of battle, he'd languish in a tent until blood frothed on his lips and a good surgeon put him down.

The thought was by in a heartbeat, and then Gaspard was crashing through the enemy line, his lance gone and his blade out, lashing out with hard, short strikes that made the most of his mount's speed and minimized the risk of having his blade torn from his hand. He took a blow on the shield and rode past it, caught another glancing strike off the pauldron, and then he was through.

He pulled his mount up short and forced the beast into a turn once he was clear. Celene's forces hadn't been sure whether to retreat in full or try for a spear wall, and as a result, they'd made a weak effort at both. The men nearest Gaspard had punched through Celene's lines, and the men on the sides had pulled up short rather than driving through, per his orders.

The middle was a mess, and the empress was flanked on both sides.

Gaspard looked over to see Remache cut down a footman with crisp efficiency. The man had good form. He might have made a chevalier, but for his romantic misunderstanding of tactics.

Laughing aloud, Gaspard spurred his mount and rode back into the crash of slaughter.

* * *

The massive warrior swung his great maul, and the blow smashed past Celene's desperate defense and slammed into her armor with crushing force.

Celene saw the world spin as she fell from her horse, and then a second terrific impact drove away what little breath was left in her lungs. The world was all sharp colors, painful and glittering as the men around her fought and died. The morning sky was sickly with smoke.

Ser Michel had been cut off from her, and over the din of battle he had gestured for her to retreat to the trees. She had almost made it, a few of her men around her while the main force tried desperately to recover, when Gaspard's warriors had found them.

After that, everything was a chaotic blur of clanging metal and shrieks of pain.

Gaspard's warrior stood over her, a huge man in huge armor. If he spoke, it was lost under the roar of battle. He did not salute with the great maul, did not extend a hand in the accepted tradition to demand her surrender. He turned and crushed the skull of one of her men—the only one who had still been standing—and then turned to her, hefting the maul without hesitation.

It was at that moment that Celene realized she might actually die.

She tried to scramble away from the warrior, but her breath wouldn't come and her side was a mass of crushing pressure. She had no idea where her ceremonial blade had fallen. She grasped blindly at the dirt as Gaspard's man raised his weapon for a final blow.

Then, from the clattering roar of battle, Ser Michel rode into view. His charger smashed into Gaspard's man, and the huge warrior slammed to the turf. Michel was on the ground a moment later, his pristine silverite longsword drawn and his shield up and ready.

Gaspard's man rolled to his feet, graceful as a dancer even in his massive armor, and even as he came up, his maul was swinging up at

Michel, but Michel stepped in close, checking the haft of the maul with his shield, and staggered Gaspard's man with a helmet to the face.

Celene rolled to her stomach with an effort. The pressure on her chest made every shallow breath a battle, and as she looked down, blinking darkness from the edge of her vision, she saw why. As strong as her armor was, the great maul had caved in the breastplate, bending it out of shape and stifling her like an iron corset.

While Michel fought for her life, Celene fumbled for the dagger tucked into a hidden channel at the base of her gauntlet. She worked it free, gasping, and sliced at the buckles that held her breastplate in place.

She heard the screech of shearing metal and the clang of a maul striking home, but she forced herself not to turn and look as she kept slicing. Whether Ser Michel had already dispatched the villain or was bleeding on the ground, the armor still needed to come off, and so she focused desperately on the task at hand, sawing at drake-leather. Her breath grew tighter, her head pounded, and wisps of light danced before her eyes, and then the buckle parted and the breastplate fell open at an unnatural angle. She drew in a shuddering sweet breath and worked frantically at the other buckles. In a moment, the great mass of now-useless metal fell to the turf beside her.

Celene would have given the Dales for a minute to sit and catch her breath.

But she was Empress of Orlais, for the moment, anyway. The title had not stopped Gaspard from attacking. It had not held the warrior back from caving in her armor with his great maul. But it served well enough to get her to her feet. As she rose, the ring on her right hand worked its magic, and the dagger flared with tongues of fire.

Michel and Gaspard's man had reached an impasse, Michel's shield locked against the warrior's hammer, each man heaving and moving with steps as quick and purposeful as the other's. The shorter man, Michel had better balance, but Gaspard's great warrior was simply so huge that Michel was losing ground anyway.

She walked as lightly as she could in her heavy greaves to where they stood, and without pause she slid her flaming dagger up under the warrior's armpit from behind.

Gaspard's man shrieked and jerked back. It was all the opening Michel needed. With a rough shove, he drove the warrior back, and Celene dove out of the way, dagger raised to help again if she was needed.

Michel followed with a great overhand blow that the warrior weakly blocked, then locked the maul with his shield and chopped down, cutting deep into the warrior's leg. The warrior fell to one knee, the maul dropping to the grassy turf, and with a final strike, Michel sheared through the man's armored gorget and crushed his throat.

"Majesty." Michel panted as Gaspard's man collapsed, still twitching. "It is not safe here."

"Thank you, my champion." Celene coughed, still trying to catch her breath. "I had wondered." She looked at the great warrior, who twitched one last time and then went still.

Celene had killed before. Any woman trained by Lady Mantillon in the bardic arts could not only slit a would-be assassin's throat in the bedroom, she could then return to the party and make witty conversation with perfect makeup and clean hands two minutes later. Even during those tests, Lady Mantillon had praised her for her cold nerves.

Still, it had been some time.

"My apologies," Michel said. "I failed you."

"Hush, Michel. While I still draw breath, you have not failed me." Celene looked back to the rest of the battlefield. Her men were being slaughtered, and there was no longer any line, just clusters of her troops around Gaspard's men, who were steadily butchering them. Riderless horses ran screaming through the field, and arrows still rained down on the remaining pockets of Celene's forces. Men wearing the imperial tabard ran for the forest, their shields flung down behind them.

She had marched at a grueling pace and promised them an ugly but easy slaughter, and then a week of rest at her Winter Palace.

“The city, do you think?” she asked.

Michel nodded. “I see little alternative.” He whistled for his horse, mounted gracefully, and pulled her up into the saddle behind him.

She opened her mouth to insist that she could still ride, and then saw her snowy white mare lying unmoving a few yards away. Its neck was twisted, and arrows were sunk into its flank, and for a moment, all Celene could remember was the last time she had gone riding. On the hunt in the woods, riding her mare, with Gaspard telling her that whatever happened was on her head.

If she had known, she would have knifed him then and finished it.

They rode hard. Michel swung his longsword in a steady arc, scything through foot soldiers and driving back mounted enemies. For a moment, it seemed they were lost in the chaos of battle, no different from any other rider, but then, over the pounding of hooves, she heard the cries of recognition, and more arrows rained down around them. One glanced off her greaves, and Celene felt sweat drip down her now unarmored back. A moment later, Michel jerked his shield up, and an arrow shattered against it a handbreadth from Celene’s face.

“Thank you, my champion.” The words came out stuttering as she bounced on the horse’s back behind him.

“I am a fool, Majesty. I should have had you ride in front.” He chopped down through a spear as well as the spearman holding it.

Then they were clear of the press of battle, riding hard for the city walls safe ahead. Behind them, she heard the crash of metal, and a quick glance showed a group of Gaspard’s horsemen giving chase.

Looking ahead over Michel’s shoulder, Celene saw the gates still open. Soldiers were pouring out, Comte Pierre’s men from Halamshiral. Her heart swelled, and she looked to her own forces. With their numbers, perhaps she could still face down Gaspard.

Even as she looked at the bloodied remains of her own forces, though, it struck her that she had burned a quarter of Pierre’s city to quell a rebellion

he hadn’t been able to put down, the rebellion that lured her into Gaspard’s trap.

“Are they with us?” she called into Michel’s ear.

“We shall know in a moment, Majesty,” he said without turning.

Ahead of the city guards, Comte Pierre and his chevaliers rode toward them. Pierre’s armor was stained with soot from the ashes that had spread across the city, and his face was drawn with fatigue and shiny with sweat. He had not had time to put his helmet back on after the morning’s display.

“Your Radiance,” he yelled as they approached.

The battle had not ranged close to Halamshiral proper, and Pierre and his men had not yet engaged either side. This was when the trap would spring, if he were part of it. His weapon was drawn, as was only right. He was riding hard for them. She felt Michel tense in front of her, ready to strike.

“Get to safety!” Pierre shouted, and rode past them. “The city, or flee east to Jader if you must! We will hold them as long as we can!”

Celene turned and saw Gaspard’s forces thundering toward them from behind, and from the right as well. She saw less than a score of her own soldiers still alive, and no resistance to stop Gaspard’s men from flanking her and penning her in.

Comte Pierre of Halamshiral and his score of chevaliers charged past them at the enemy line closing in behind them.

She saw the rain of arrows come down into Pierre’s men. They were far enough away for Gaspard’s archers to fire without fear of hitting friendly troops. Pierre took an arrow in the shoulder but kept riding, putting himself and his men between her and Gaspard.

And still, there were not enough of them to check the whole line.

As if hearing her thoughts, Michel called back, “Some of Gaspard’s men will get by!” She had not noticed him looking back, and she wondered if he could tell just by the sound of hoof beats.

“Can you make the city?”

“Perhaps.” There was a question at the end of the sentence, words he was unwilling to say even while carrying his empress out of battle.

“Michel, if we reach Halamshiral, can we hold it?”

“The city guards were stretched thin already by the rebellion, and I would guess Pierre rode with most of his chevaliers,” Michel said. An arrow clanged off his armored shoulder. Ahead of them, Pierre’s foot soldiers died under a withering black rain. “Most of them will die, as will our own soldiers. With just the common city troops … It may give you a chance to negotiate a surrender, but it will not save the throne.”

Celene swallowed. Pierre and his men would not die for nothing. *Her* men would not die for nothing.

“The Winter Palace?”

“It is not built for defense, Majesty.”

She had feared as much, but had wanted to hear it from her champion to be sure. It would have to be Jader, then, several days’ ride to the east, where Lady Seryl, a longtime ally of absolute loyalty, would shelter them.

“Get us to the trees, Michel,” she said. “We retreat to Jader, contact Val Royeaux, and return to crush Gaspard with the full might of the empire.”

“As you command, Majesty,” he said, and his charger pulled to the left, away from the city gates and Gaspard’s closing men.

They rode, and behind them, the soldiers of Orlais died so that Celene might escape.

* * *

Briala came back to herself in the dubious comfort of a prison coach, her head throbbing.

It was far more gentle a prison than a common barred wagon, where she would have ridden on bare wood, open to the elements and the thrown rocks of human peasants. The coach had a seat, and it was even padded, if thinly. The barred side windows were curtained, though the morning light shone through the thin red fabric. Though the door lacked a handle, a small chamber pot sat in a holder by the wall. If not for the shackles, Briala could almost have fancied herself still traveling to Halamshiral, Celene’s favored servant, secretly preventing a great and needless tragedy.

Then the stench of the burning buildings reached her. The smoke stung at her throat, raw from where she had screamed the night before. Her armor was scuffed where she had fallen to her knees, wrenching free of the chevaliers' grip. Michel had struck her, she remembered dimly. It hadn't been punitive. She could see the wary concern etched into his features, lit by fire. The other chevaliers might have taken her shrieks, her pulling away, as resistance, and done what any chevalier would do to a knife-ear who didn't know her place. Michel's gentle strike had been an act of mercy.

She tried to remember whether his expression had given away any greater feeling about the fire, then gave up when sitting upright made her head pound with pain.

The coach was moving, traveling the main road out of Halamshiral if the gentle bumps and jolts were any gauge. Either Gaspard's gambit had happened so swiftly and smoothly that it was already finished, or it had not yet started.

That Gaspard *had* a plan, she did not doubt. Celene had removed herself from Val Royeaux, thinking herself clever in outmaneuvering her cousin. It would never strike her that here in Halamshiral, with only enough soldiers to crush some elven rebels, she would be vulnerable. Briala would have warned her.

She supposed she still could.

Her arms had been shackled behind her, and they ached already from the uncomfortable position. Being unconscious in her armor had not helped, either. She lay down on the seat, lifted her legs, and kicked on the sliding panel that separated her from the driver.

After a moment, the panel slid back, and a gray-bearded man wearing a soldier's helmet and a chainmail vest squinted in at her. "What do you want, rabbit?"

Briala swallowed. "Some water, please."

He frowned, evidently thinking over this outlandish request. "Wouldn't normally give a prisoner any food until noon."

She stared at him without saying anything and after a moment, he grunted and held a waterskin up to the panel. With her arms shackled behind her, she couldn’t take it. Instead, she raised her face up as close to the panel as she could and opened her mouth.

The man unstoppered the skin and let her drink until she pulled back. He made no lewd comments, and she didn’t even see a smirk. “Thank you,” she said when she was finished.

“Orders are to treat you gently. Just don’t cause any trouble,” he said, not unkindly, “and we’ll have a nice quiet ride back to Val Royeaux.” He slid the panel shut.

She looked at the wooden panel while tepid water dripped from her chin.

She could be wrong. Gaspard could legitimately be so surprised by Celene marching on Halamshiral that he had no ambush prepared. He could still want to win the day through diplomacy and politics, limiting the spilled blood to the elves of Halamshiral. He might lack the nerve to commit treason by attacking Celene directly.

But Briala knew a great deal about Gaspard, and she would never describe him as lacking nerve.

The threat was real. The question was whether to raise the alarm.

It would show her loyalty, even in the face of what had happened here … but what good was that, precisely? Her loyalty had never been in doubt before, and all it had earned her was an order not to mistreat the prisoner on the ride back to Val Royeaux.

She had loved Celene. She *did* love Celene. And she knew without question that the elves of Orlais fared better under her rule than they would under Gaspard’s.

But she could still smell the smoke of the slums burning.

She was still sitting silent, ready to knock on the wooden panel but not yet moving, when the cry of alarm rose around her some time later.

Moments after that came the buzzing wind of hundreds of arrows followed by the shrieks of men and horses dying. Calls to protect the

empress were drowned out by thundering hooves, and then the crash of metal rocked the coach.

The noise was deafening, a cacophony of clanging and crunching marked by grunts and screams as men died outside all around her. Briala shut her eyes, though it did little to help. She heard arrows thud on the wood of her prison, and then a sharp crack directly in front of her.

She opened her eyes and saw that an arrow had ripped through the curtain and sunk a finger's width deep into the seat a few inches from her leg.

Briala kept her eyes open after that.

A sharp jolt rocked the coach, and a horse screamed from the impact. Briala heard her guard yell, and the coach lurched into motion. Briala lay back down on the seat, bracing her shoulders and legs against opposite walls of the coach, and held on as the jolts and bumps rattled her like a stone in a cup.

Then came the pounding of hooves right beside the coach, and a yell from the driver's seat that cut off as metal crunched on metal. A moment later, the coach shuddered to a stop with a suddenness that sent Briala tumbling from the seat.

She lay on the floor, her head still pounding, as the sounds of battle continued around her. Men yelled and screamed and died, and horses thundered past, and Briala's coach rattled from the noise.

Briala had no idea how long it lasted. It was impossible to think with the coach shaking around her, arrows slamming into the walls and men crying for the Maker's mercy outside. She huddled as best she could, teeth chattering, until finally, some unknown time later, she realized that the roar of battle had started to quiet. When the coach stopped shaking, she forced herself back to her knees.

There was no formal end, but when she heard the sound of men giving orders grow closer than the battle cries, she moved back to her seat.

The calls around her had the same world-weary constancy of the chatelaine preparing for a minor ball back in Val Royeaux. Get our

wounded over here. Don’t waste time on the buckles, cut the damned thing off him before he bleeds to death. Send men with ropes to get the loose horses. One of the lords needs a surgeon for his leg. Don’t kill the poor bastard, he might be one of ours under all that mess.

“In the wagon? Celene’s elf, my lord.”

Briala opened her eyes.

Grand Duke Gaspard opened the door to her wagon a moment later. He was unmasked, and he had taken off his helmet, but she knew his face from private encounters years ago, back when he and Celene had been on better terms. His hair was sweat-slicked and his face flushed from the morning’s fight, and his armor bore dents and scuffs that proved he had not hung back to let others fight the battle for him.

“You removed the emblem of Chalons,” she said, nodding at his bare armor. “I knew you would have a means to justify it by the chevaliers’ code.”

“I remember you,” he said, squinting thoughtfully into the dimness of the coach. “Her handmaid. I was sure I’d seen you unmasked. No armor then, of course.”

“Of course.” Briala inclined her head politely.

Gaspard smiled. “And there’s always a way to justify it,” he said. “In defense of honor, or protection against corruption.” He leaned on the coach, one gauntleted hand gripping the doorframe. The other pointed at her. The silverite glinted blue in the wan morning light. “Against a mad empress in league with the elves.”

“So you lied to your fellow nobles—”

“Lied?” Gaspard cut her off and shook his head, still smiling. “There was more than enough truth in what I said. Don’t be modest, girl. Noble Orlesian sons and daughters came back from Celene’s university talking about improving the alienages, and the professors write that they’re being asked to teach elves now as well. The taxes always seemed to slide around the poorer merchants. Maker’s breath, how many times did I ask for leave

to mount an expedition to drive out the Dalish only to get sent off to hunt for darkspawn instead?”

“Three.” Briala smiled thinly.

“I’m impressed,” Gaspard said, with another shake of his head. “One little elf, and you had the Orlesian Empire dancing to your tune. So, no, I’d say that the only lie I told was when I suggested you ruled our empress with arts practiced in the bedchamber.”

Briala’s breath caught. It was only for a moment, and she tried to cover it with a disgusted sneer, but Gaspard, whatever his faults, was an observant man.

“Oh, Maker, it’s *true*?” He staggered back as if shot, roaring with laughter. “No *wonder* she refused to marry me!” He actually pounded the side of the coach. Briala felt herself flushing and squared her shoulders as best she could with her arms still shackled behind her as Gaspard looked back in, wiping his eyes. “I thought she was too proud, too idealistic, but I suppose my manhood was just the wrong tool for the job. I might as well have been hunting darkspawn with cold iron.” He grinned at her. “When I should’ve been carrying silverite.”

“You’re saying I’m silverite?” Briala asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You’re easier on the eyes than I am, rabbit.”

“So you spread the rumors, which forced her to crush the rebellion instead of letting it sputter out and die peacefully … and because you knew she would come out here to make a personal show of force, you used it as a trap.”

Gaspard’s easy grin faded. “It doesn’t sound like you’re just now putting that together.” At her silence, he nodded. “Why didn’t you warn them?”

Briala blinked and looked at the wooden panel through which she had spoken to the wagon driver. “I didn’t figure it out until it was too late.”

“Really?” Gaspard asked, frowning. “That’s quite a shame. A little warning might have saved a lot of chevaliers’ lives.”

“I did my best to save lives.” Briala pointed with a jerk of her chin back toward Halamshiral. “It seems that I failed.”

“The interesting thing,” Gaspard said, looking at her thoughtfully, “is that you just told me that you knew I’d set that up, so Celene would have to come in and crush those rebels. But rather than blame me for setting the trap, you blame her for walking into it.”

“I had never hoped for better from you, my lord.”

“But you did from her.” Gaspard shook his head. “All these years, gently pushing her on your people’s behalf, and you started to forget how much was her and how much was you. You never thought she’d do something like this. But she’s the Empress of Orlais. She doesn’t care about the elves. She’ll kill every elf in the empire if she has to.”

Briala glared at him. “You’re lying,” she said, and her voice cracked.

“Apparently, I lie even less than I think I do,” Gaspard said with a grin that showed his teeth. He stepped back and shut the door, then leaned in and spoke through the barred window. “Now, you sit tight. You’ll be heading back to Val Royeaux, and if you tell the right stories, you’ll be comfortable and unharmed. If you help me with any information that crushes the last of whatever resistance Celene or her allies might come up with—”

“And that’s why you’re here,” Briala said, and felt a moment’s satisfaction in watching the big nobleman pause. It was the crack in her voice that had done it, the little bit of affected weakness that let him slip up. “I’d wondered why you’d come look in on a knife-eared servant so soon after your great victory.”

Gaspard chuckled. “I thought I’d see the *knife-eared servant* who was so important to Celene—”

“Whom you don’t have yet,” Briala finished. “Celene or her allies, you said. You wanted to see if she’d talked to me. If I knew where she was now. Because despite your ambush, you didn’t capture her. Your swift, sure strike to take the empire doesn’t work without a surrender or a corpse … and you have neither.”

It hung between them.

“You’re dangerous,” Gaspard said, lips pursed in thought. He stepped back from the window, and his next words were to his men nearby. “Keep a

guard on the coach. Nobody talks to the prisoner."

Briala heard the clank and rasp of armor as he strode away, and then, moments later, the soldiers got back to work setting up camp and tending to the wounded.

They had never captured Felassan, as far as she knew. Celene was free. She had options.

The options nearly paralyzed her, in fact. Celene in battle, possibly dead, was an idea, a series of actions that closed off certain avenues and opened others. Celene free, still in command of the empire … was the woman who had burned the elven rebels. The woman Briala had failed to warn.

It would have been so much easier had Celene died on that field. Briala would have mourned, and felt guilty for mourning the woman who had killed so many of Briala's people, but whatever happened afterward, it would have been simple.

But simple would wait. Hopefully, Felassan would do the same, wherever he was.

Closing her eyes, Briala yanked the arrow—blocked from Gaspard's view when she'd sat up—free from the seat behind her, and began to work on the shackles.

* * *

Gaspard had ordered his tents erected within sight of Halamshiral's walls.

He stood, uncomfortable in his armor, while a servant carefully cleaned the signs of battle from his breastplate, polishing away scratches and plastering over dents with a bit of paste that could be painted to match the shining blue-white of the metal.

It was dull work, better done when Gaspard wasn't wearing the armor, but Gaspard suspected he might yet need it, and for what was to come, he needed to look noble, not battle-damaged. So for now, he compromised and stood stock-still in his tent while the fussy servant made the breastplate that had saved Gaspard's life look pretty again.

When it was finally done, he dismissed the man and strode to the prison tent, his armor gleaming in the midday light. By now, the smoke from Halamshiral's slums was a dull haze across the sky, and dozens of smaller oily clouds rose from where funeral pyres marked the scene of the morning's battle. The common prisoners were huddled together under heavy guard, stripped of arms and armor, and the camp healers were doing their best to save as many of Gaspard's men as they could.

"The Battle of Halamshiral," Gaspard said as he lifted the flap and let himself into the prison tent. "What do you think, my lords?"

"I must admit," Comte Pierre of Halamshiral rasped from where he lay on a bedroll, a surgeon kneeling beside him, "that I might wish a different name." The man had been stripped of his armor, and his shoulder and gut were covered with blood-soaked bandages. The shoulder would heal. The gut wouldn't.

Seated at a table, sipping a cup of watered wine, Duke Remache smiled. "Completely understandable, Pierre. I would hardly wish it to be Lydes, nor would the grand duke enjoy a battle at Verchiel." Unlike Gaspard, Remache had removed his armor. Gaspard supposed he should be grateful that the man had at least put on riding leathers instead of court silks.

Gaspard made a gesture, and the surgeon bowed and left without a word. When they were alone, Gaspard sighed. "You should be proud, Pierre. Outnumbered, forced into the fight, and you still made it harder than I expected."

"She escaped." Pierre took in a long, ragged breath and stifled a cough, flinching as he did.

"So she did," Gaspard said, and knelt down by the injured man. "Her elf, the one that killed Mainserai? She has no idea where Celene might be."

"Mainserai." Pierre's pale face twisted. "Damn the man. He brought this to my city. The rebellion, the bloodshed … the fire." He smiled bitterly. "I should thank the elf for putting that bastard down."

Gaspard shook his head. "No, my friend. I'm afraid you have no one but yourself to blame."

Pierre's eyes widened, and he fought his way to a seated position. "You insult me," he said, gasping the words through the pain. "I will have satisfaction."

Gaspard ducked his head. "My apology, Pierre. I intended no offense, and my words were ill-chosen." With an effort, Pierre lay back down. "But the elves rebelled because you didn't crush them. You felt sorry for them, didn't you?"

"Mainserai deserved it," Pierre said again.

Gaspard sighed. "You thought they were right to be angry at Mainserai, so instead of raising an army and stomping out the rebels, you wrung your hands and sent a few extra patrols and hoped that everything would eventually quiet down. You taught the elves to fight, just like a bad horseman teaches his charger to buck and bite." He shook his head. "You taught them to attack the guards, when you allowed it to go unpunished. You taught them to dream of a life outside the slums where they belonged. And if Celene hadn't slapped shackles on her lover and burned those slums, you would have taught every damned knife-ear in Orlais to stand up against us."

"Do you know how much damage was done to my city?" Pierre asked, his voice rough. "How much coin I will lose? How many families will starve because Celene would not let the elven anger run its course?"

Gaspard smiled. "Even so. Now, my lord … do you know where Celene would have run to?"

Pierre clenched his jaw. "No, Gaspard. I do not. And you know that I would not tell you if I did."

Behind them, Remache rose to his feet. "I know a few men who might loosen his tongue."

Gaspard froze, then slowly looked back over his shoulder. "Comte Pierre of Halamshiral is a lord of Orlais, Remache. More than that, he is my prisoner. My code prohibits his torture."

Remache nodded. "Yes, of course. Perhaps you might wish to examine the defenses, my lord? If you take a few hours to ensure that the

preparations are to your liking, I might have more news—”

“Remache. Have done.” Gaspard stood and turned to face the lord, his armor clanking with the movements. “I understand that you don’t think much of the chevaliers’ code, but I will not violate the spirit of it to obey the letter. I will not torture him. I will not leave so that you may do so. If you lay a hand upon my prisoner, I will defend him with my life. Or, as is more likely, with yours.”

Remache swallowed. “Of course, my lord. I apologize.”

“Accepted. Now, gather the men at the command tent. I want plans for the fastest and safest way to burn Halamshiral to the ground.”

“I … yes, my lord.” Remache bowed and left without another word.

“Gaspard,” Pierre said from behind him.

“Celene could be inside, Pierre.” Gaspard didn’t turn around. “My men say she rode for the woods, but they could have been mistaken. Or you could have shown her a hidden entrance. Maker knows Val Royeaux is full of hidden tunnels. Why should Halamshiral be any different?”

“She isn’t inside, Gaspard.”

“I have nowhere else to look, my friend.” Gaspard looked back at the man on the bedroll. Pierre’s color had gone waxy and gray. “Rest now. I will send for the surgeon.”

“I beg you,” Pierre said softly. “Do not burn my city.”

“You let Celene burn part of it already,” Gaspard said. “Why shouldn’t I finish what she started?”

Pierre closed his eyes and fell back, anguish twisted across his features. Finally, he said, “Jader.”

“You’re certain of Lady Seryl’s loyalty to Celene?” Gaspard asked.

“Absolutely. We have discussed it at length.” Pierre didn’t open his eyes. “I told Celene to get to Jader if Halamshiral fell. If she did not reach the city, she rode east for Jader. Messengers would have been sent there as soon as you began your attack.”

Gaspard nodded thoughtfully. He hadn’t been sure of Lady Seryl—the woman played the Game well enough to have kept him guessing—but

Pierre's anguish spoke of a true confession.

He gave a sharp whistle. A moment later, a young woman came into the tent. She wore a fine robe of gray satin and a ring on each finger. Slung across her back was a slender staff.

"Heal him," Gaspard said. "The gut wound first."

"*Obviously*, my lord," the woman said with a small smile, and Gaspard smiled despite himself.

She knelt beside Pierre, and the lord opened his eyes in confusion as she touched him. A cool white light shone from her hands, spreading softly to Lord Pierre's wound.

"The Circle has backed you?" Pierre asked.

"The Circle hasn't really voiced an opinion just yet," Gaspard said with a grin. "This is Montsimmard's daughter."

"Lienne de Montsimmard, my lord," she said with a small bow, not lifting her hands from the wound.

"Montsimmard saw the war between the templars and the mages coming years ago," Gaspard said. He watched the healing magic with some interest. "And when his little girl started hexing the servants and curing her horse's bad leg, he decided that he didn't want her in the middle of it."

"An apostate." Pierre looked down at the hands on his torso as though they were poisoned. Then he looked back up at Gaspard, eyes narrowed. "So I'm to be killed after all, then? You can't leave me alive after I've seen something that could have you executed by the templars."

"Pierre, my friend, I allowed you to meet dear Lienne for the same reason that I healed you." Moving carefully around Lienne, Gaspard knelt back down. "You're *mine* now."

Pierre clenched his jaw. "I gave you Jader to save my city, Gaspard."

"Yes, you did. And just like when you let those elves go after your guards, you taught me something in that moment." Gaspard bared his teeth. "You taught me where to hit you so you flinch. Now, if I had called for the surgeon instead of this lovely young lady, you'd have been dead inside of three days … and whoever took charge of Halamshiral after you? If I

threatened *him* with the death of his city, he might sneer and tell me to burn the filthy peasants alive." As Pierre went pale, Gaspard leaned in. "But you love your city. You'll do anything to keep it safe. And you know that I know that about you." Then he sat back and patted Pierre on the leg with a little laugh. "So I think it's best for you, and me, and even those filthy peasants, if Lienne takes care of you."

"My lord," Pierre said sadly, and shut his eyes and nodded.

"Yes, I am," Gaspard said, and stood up.

He left the prison tent and walked to the great pavilion where his men were speaking with Remache. "Jader," he said as he walked in.

Remache shot him a surprised look. "Pierre gave up Celene's location?"

"All in how you ask, Remache." Gaspard nodded to his men, who were already marking off spots on the road to Jader. "Seryl is Celene's. Assuming we didn't get every damned bird that left the city…"

"We did not, my lord," said Ser Beaulieu.

Gaspard smiled. "Ah, well. One can always hope. Seryl will be ready, and given that her city is built to hold off half the dog-lords of Ferelden if need be, that's going to be an ugly fight."

"Blockade, my lord?" asked Ser Laguerre.

Gaspard nodded. "Across the Imperial Highway and through the trees … here." He pointed at a likely chokepoint. "I want to be able to walk from the Waking Sea to the Frostbacks on their shoulders."

Ser Beaulieu grinned. "Might be hard to catch the empress with you on our shoulders, my lord."

"Maybe Remache, then," Gaspard said, gesturing at the lord. "He's lighter. Same goes for the west, as well. If she was smart enough to lie to our man Pierre, she *could* be running for Val Royeaux already."

Remache smiled thinly. "We block Celene from Lady Seryl to the east, and we hold Halamshiral, as well as Lydes. She is trapped."

Gaspard grimaced. "She didn't rule this empire for twenty years just by throwing balls and banquets," he said, remembering what his cousin had said on that hunting ride a few weeks back.

“She’s trapped once she stands before me in chains.”

8

Briala kicked on the panel separating her compartment from the front seat of the prison coach.

It took a while, but eventually the guard slid the panel back. “What the hell do you … Maker’s breath!”

The arrow was lodged in Briala’s armor. “Came through the bars … late in the battle. Tell Gaspard I’ll talk. Just need … water…” she said, coughing through the words. As the guard gaped at her, she coughed again and fell back.

She’d had nothing to use for blood, but her dark armor would have made it difficult to see anyway, and she was hoping that the guard was too tired after the day’s battle to notice.

Moments later, she heard the jangle of keys on the prison coach’s door, and the guard rushed inside.

She looked up, swung the shackles, and caught him across the face. As he stumbled back, she sat up and drove the arrow up under his chin into his throat.

He stopped shaking a moment later, and Briala stepped outside.

The horses were gone, and she’d killed the only guard. The wagon was inside the perimeter of Gaspard’s forces, and his command pavilion was over to the left. The fastest path out of Gaspard’s army was to the right. She turned and climbed up to the driver’s seat, and was relieved to find her dagger, bow, and arrows in a storage locker.

Nobody was yet looking at her.

The important thing about growing up elven was learning how not to attract attention. It had mattered less in Celene's house than in the alienages, but her mother had still made sure that Briala was only noticed when she wanted to be.

Humans were hunters, but they were also farmers. When the deer ran, the humans had to chase it. When the scared rabbit froze, the humans had to loose an arrow. That was their way—proving their mastery, their skill.

But few humans tracked the movements of their cattle. The idle, complacent sheep walking from one tuft of grass to the next wasn't a target the humans felt compared to master.

It was time for Briala to be a nice, lazy sheep and walk out of Gaspard's army in broad daylight.

The dead guard's thin wool cloak lay on the seat where he'd taken it off once the day's heat and his chainmail shirt had left him sweating. She pulled it around herself, hiding the fine drakeskin armor, and brought the hood up to hide her ears.

She tucked her bow up under her arm and looked around the coach until she saw a bucket. It was old and stained, likely used for something she didn't want to think about, but at the moment, it was worth more to her than gold.

An elf in fine armor with an ironbark bow would be spotted in moments.

But as she hefted the bucket, hopped down from the coach, and headed toward the perimeter at a slow, lazy shuffle, she was just another servant taking too long to fetch water for her master, her thin cloak pulled up for warmth against the autumn chill.

She passed a row of tents where most of Gaspard's soldiers were resting, roasting food over cookfires. They'd taken off their armor, and their undershirts were stained with rust and sometimes blood. Other servants hurried to and fro, with bandages and food and everything else an army needed to stay alive and moving. A few were elven, and they shot her surprised looks, but none of them stopped her.

She was tempted by the line of horses, with only a token guard and a few serving boys and farriers to get past, but she kept walking. Servants with buckets didn’t ride horses.

Still no alarm sounded, and Briala walked, slowly, casually, pausing to shift the bucket to her other hand when the perimeter guards ahead met a scout. She tried to ignore the sweat trailing down her neck.

The scout finished talking to the perimeter guard and headed for the command tent. Briala started moving again.

She moved a moment too soon.

The guard didn’t notice, looking out for threats in the other direction, but the scout, trained to see everything, glanced her way. Just a glance, but it was the end of her walk with the bucket.

The guard wore chainmail and had both a crossbow and a short blade for close work. Briala saw a waterskin at his waist, new enough to be shiny, and also saw that his blade was belted too high for an easy draw. A novice, then.

The scout was more dangerous. He carried a longbow, which meant that he was trained, and a pair of woodsman’s hatchets. By his bow-legged gait, he was tired from riding all morning, but he was still alert enough to have noticed something about her. It could have been a glint from her armor, or the shape of her bow beneath the cloak, or even just something in her walk that drew his attention.

Briala kept walking. So did the scout, heading toward the command tent off to Briala’s right and behind her.

As soon as he was out of her line of sight, she heard his pace change. He was good enough that it wasn’t obvious, but fatigue made a scout’s instincts kick in, and his footsteps were suddenly quieter. He was circling, coming back toward her.

Without lifting her head, Briala angled slightly to the right. It wasn’t enough for her to see him, but even as he started to close, she put herself cleanly between him and the perimeter guard.

She needed five steps.

“Hey, you, girl,” came the call from behind her. Casual, as though he was about to ask for a sip of water.

Four. Three. She tightened her grip on the bucket.

“Hey!” the scout barked, and now there was no hiding it. Any servant would have stopped and turned around. The perimeter guard shuffled.

Two. One.

“Guards!” the scout yelled, and she heard the creak of leather and wood as he lifted his longbow.

The perimeter guard turned and saw her just a few feet away. His eyes widened as he took in the armor, and he jerked the crossbow up.

Briala threw the bucket at him and rolled as he fired.

The bolt split through the cheap wood, sending splinters flying into the guard’s face, and she heard it hiss past her ear, close enough to rip the hood of the cloak.

The scout had been behind her. He had enough training to see the crossbow come up, and Briala heard him dive to the ground even as she did. The bolt hit nothing but the bucket.

But the scout was also tired from riding, and it took him one critical moment for his tired legs to coil beneath him and kick him back to his feet.

By then, Briala was already back on her feet, her bow drawn and leveled, and by the time he saw her, her arrow was in his heart.

She turned to see the perimeter guard fumbling for his sword. She stepped in, drew her dagger, and had it across his throat before his blade cleared its scabbard.

Briala started walking again. She got five steps before the shouts sounded behind her, and then she broke into a run.

It was fifty yards to the trees. Heart pounding, Briala ran without looking back. A bolt thudded into the turf in front of her. Another hit her back—a glancing shot, deflected by her drakeskin, but still enough to make her stumble. She’d have a bruise tomorrow.

She reached the trees and kept running. Low-hanging branches, fiery with red and gold in the autumn, slapped her face and tore at her cloak. A

crushing pain drove the breath from her lungs as another bolt caught her on the shoulder, and she staggered, tripped on a spidery root, and slammed into the ground with an impact that sprayed brown leaves.

Briala heard hoof beats.

She'd been trusting that the trees would keep her safe, that the guards wouldn't come into the forest after a single running elf. Judging by the shouts, she had been wrong.

She scrambled to her feet, peering back through the branches, to see at least a score of men charging toward her, plus several more on horseback. The horses wouldn't help them as much in the trees, at least if she kept to the thickest parts of the forest, but trying to lose so many …

She raised her bow. There was no way she could outrun them, and if the fight was coming, it was best to let it come on her terms.

As she drew back her bow, the ground beneath her heaved.

She thought for a moment she'd been shot again, and she dropped to her knees as the whole world around her lurched, the ground bucking and heaving like water in a birdbath after a rock was tossed in.

Trees swayed and danced, and leaves hissed and rustled as they shook free. The riot of red and gold filled the air before Briala, and she could see nothing of the men out on the open field. She could hear the screams and shouts of horses and men, though. She held still and let the ground twist and shake beneath her, gritting her teeth to stop them from rattling.

When the leaves cleared, Briala saw the field again. Most of the men were on their knees. Some of the horses were riderless, and one had fallen and wasn't moving. The men had their swords drawn and turned wildly from side to side, looking for an enemy to face as the earth itself turned against them.

"Aneth ara, da'len," Felassan said, and Briala jumped to her feet. She would have sworn that she had been alone, but now her mentor stood at her side, his cloak clean as always, his staff raised toward the men in the field. "So glad you could make it."

"You were waiting?" Briala asked, and her mentor smiled.

“I wasn’t going to go *in* there,” he said, shuddering. “That’s an army! But I suspected you had matters well in hand … or possibly well in bucket.”

His staff flared a brilliant green, and overhead, the hazy afternoon sky fell into darkness. Lightning split the air, a blue-white bolt that dazzled Briala to blindness even as the crashing thunder made her guts tremble. The horses screamed as another bolt crashed down upon the field, and then more, until Briala lost count.

“All right, I’m ready to leave whenever you are,” Felassan said with a tired smile. Squinting through the lightning-lit darkness, Briala saw scorch marks on the field and unmoving, charred bodies.

“I believe so, yes,” Briala said, and followed her mentor deeper into the woods.

* * *

Celene and Ser Michel encountered the first group just a few hours after escaping Gaspard’s ambush.

They had ridden north from the battle into woods that were light enough that they could still ride but thick enough to hide them from view at a distance. Michel had pushed his stallion for just a few minutes, then slowed to a trot, and finally to a walk.

“I’m sorry, Majesty,” he had said before she could ask. “Riding double, we would ride Cheritenne to death at that pace, and we will need him to carry us for some time yet.” He patted his horse’s flank, and the horse whickered agreeably.

“I trust in your expertise, Ser Michel,” she had said. “Do what you must to get us out of here alive.”

And so they had walked along an old hunting trail for a few hours, Ser Michel squinting at the hazy sun and keeping them moving northeast in hopes of circling around Halamshiral itself and returning to the Imperial Highway on the far side. Celene had stayed silent, ignoring the chafing of the parts of her ceremonial armor she was still wearing—armor that had

never been meant for real use, for all the beautiful filigree lining the breastplate that was now crushed and forgotten behind them.

Then, all at once the woods came alive.

Ser Michel tensed. That was all the warning Celene had before a crossbow bolt hissed past them. Michel leaned forward, and she thought for a moment that he'd been hit. Then, almost falling from the saddle, he lunged out with his blade, and she heard a dull *twang* and saw the rope that had been stretched across the trail snap away to either side.

Had Michel panicked and spurred Cheritenne to a gallop, they would have hit the rope and likely broken all of their necks. Instead, as armored men leaped out from behind trees, they had a fighting chance.

The attackers were all around them. Celene saw chainmail and simple weapons, but there were at least half a dozen men, plus a few more hanging back with crossbows. Those odds would be difficult even for a chevalier of Michel's valor. With her slowing him down, the odds were even worse.

"Can we flee?" she called as Michel spurred his stallion and brutally rode down the nearest man.

"No!"

"Then kill them!" Celene ducked and slid down to the ground.

She heard her champion swear, and then a pair of Gaspard's men were upon her.

They sneered, holding their swords loosely and leaving their shields low. They must have been searching for her for hours, and had to be as tired as she felt. "Surrender now, Empress," one of them said as the other circled around her. "You're unarmored, and you're no warrior. Perhaps Gaspard will show some mercy."

She lowered her arms, her shoulders hunched in defeat, and the one behind her raised his sword. He probably thought he was doing it quietly.

She stepped, turned the blow on a vambrace that, though ornamental, was still made from silverite, and put her dagger through her attacker's eye. The magic from her ruby ring sent fire skimming along the blade, and smoke poured from the dead man's mouth as he fell, gaping in blank horror.

Celene turned to see the man who'd spoken to her raising his shield. The ring on her other hand hummed with magic, and she saw each of his movements with the clarity of a master painter. She could feel the tiny movements he was hiding, meant to move him into range to attack by surprise, and sense the movements that would turn his blow away. The ring was old, a gift from Lady Mantillon, who claimed that it had been worn by a legendary noble thief called the Black Fox.

"You're correct," she said, and drew a second dagger. "I am no warrior. I am your empress, and for lifting a blade against me, your life is forfeit, as are the lives of all in your family. Now tell me, what foul beast of burden spawned one capable of such treason?"

He hesitated. Which, of course, had been all she wanted. Every man, unless he was trained, would pause when asked a question in such a tone. Even if he didn't answer it, he would hesitate.

She moved in, the ring guiding her into the memory of years of training at Lady Mantillon's insistence. She skipped around his shield and outside his striking arm, checked the arm with a slash, and stabbed up at his throat with a quick one-two strike.

He flinched, and his shield came up.

It was all Celene needed. She dropped to a knee behind him, reversed her grip, and stabbed deep into the back of his unarmored leg. As he screamed, her other dagger came up into his crotch.

They were both still flaming, of course, and she took a little petty satisfaction in that.

As the man dropped to his knees, shrieking and retching, Celene rose to a defensive crouch, then turned and twisted on instinct as a bolt snapped past her. She charged the shooter as he struggled to wind his weapon, and he finished cranking it just as her daggers punched through his leather armor and pinned him to a tree.

Celene pulled her blades free and turned at the sound of clashing metal. The last of Gaspard's men swung a long-handled axe, trying to knock Michel from the saddle. Her champion turned the blow, and Cheritenne

reared back and sent Gaspard's man staggering back with blows from his hooves. A moment later, Michel's blade sheared through armor and bone, and the man fell screaming, clutching at the bloody stump of his elbow.

"You risk yourself, Majesty." Michel leaned over in the saddle and finished the man off with a clean strike to the head.

"I could hardly sit behind you and provide nothing more than another target, Michel."

He grunted, swung down from the saddle, and quickly checked Cheritenne's flank for cuts while the horse snorted. "My duty is to protect you."

"And mine is to rule Orlais," she said, "but both of us may need to tend to our duties with a certain flexibility for the time being."

"True." He chuckled and looked over at the men she had killed. "And well done."

Celene looked around at the carnage. "This is likely not our last fight. I believe I would do better without such heavy armor."

"Many of these men are wearing chainmail." Michel squinted at the daggers. "Though I suspect you'd prefer leather or hide?"

"Something I can move in, Michel."

He pointed at one of the men who'd held the trip-rope. He was wearing hunter's leathers, and what was left of them seemed clean and well cared for. "That one will do. I damaged the armor on his arm and leg, though, and … I believe the helmet is finished."

She took a closer look, and then quickly looked away. "Yes, I believe you're right. Strip him."

Celene turned to the man she'd stabbed to death, the one with the crossbow. His unseeing eyes were open. She closed them absently as she examined his armor. "This one is unharmed except for the chestpiece," she called over.

"Excellent. I should just be a moment. And…" He paused, and Celene looked over, then raised an eyebrow as he led a rangy brown gelding out from the trees. "I believe we need no longer ride double."

It took Ser Michel a few minutes to strip the armor and adjust the straps for Celene's slender frame. He worked with brisk efficiency while Celene stripped off the remains of her heavy ceremonial armor and got the feel for the stolen horse. It was thin and skittish, but it moved well, and by the time Michel was ready to help Celene into her armor, she had the horse firmly under control.

They encountered the second group a few hours later, as Ser Michel led Celene south toward the Imperial Highway.

The woods were thicker north of Halamshiral, and Celene had to trust Michel's directions as they picked their way down the animal trail. With two horses instead of one, Michel had pushed them back to a trot, and Celene already felt the ache in her legs and at the base of her spine from the unaccustomed exercise. The leather armor fit well enough to protect her in battle, but it hadn't been made for her, and she could already feel where she'd have blisters later.

And then, without warning, four armored men stepped out onto the trail with swords raised.

"We'll have the horses," the one in the lead called out.

Celene slid a dagger out, keeping one hand steady on her horse, who wasn't trained to ride through battle like Ser Michel's mount. The four men wore chainmail under filthy tabards, and their blades were the short swords spearmen used when joining battle at close quarters.

Then, beneath the dirt and blood on their tabards, she saw the golden lion on a field of purple.

"You're *my* soldiers," she said, and immediately felt like a fool.

They squinted, and one at the back, an older veteran with a thick mustache, went pale and stepped back. "Empress Celene!"

The leader was younger and angrier, and more blood spattered his armor. He sniffed. "Not my empress."

Ser Michel drew his longsword. "If Orlesian blood still flows in your veins—"

“Not in her fine armor anymore, is she?” the leader of Celene’s men said to his fellows, talking as though Michel weren’t there. “And I don’t see hundreds of shining chevaliers ready to do her bidding. That might be because most of them are lying dead back at Halamshiral … while you ran away.”

Ser Michel’s sword flashed once.

“If Orlesian blood still flows in your veins,” he repeated as the other man hit the ground, “and you wish for it to *remain* there, you will show your empress proper respect.”

The three men looked at Michel, and then at Celene. Then, hesitantly, they bowed.

“We fled once our commander signaled the retreat, Your Imperial Majesty,” the old soldier said. “I swear by the Maker, we fought with honor until then.”

She nodded. “My champion is leading me to Jader, where we will rally our forces.”

She started to command them to come with her—to rebuild the army that would grind that bastard Gaspard into the dirt—but she saw the old soldier’s face tense, and she paused instead.

“Your Radiance,” he said hesitantly, “we were making our way toward Jader, but Gaspard’s men have blocked the road.”

“Gaspard must have suspected you might try to get there,” said another soldier. “They had archers and horsemen. We barely made it back into the woods.”

“Then we will…” Celene paused, catching a tiny headshake from Ser Michel. “… Find another path.”

“What are we to do?” asked the third man, barely a man at all. He hadn’t spoken until now, and his voice cracked with fear. “Will they take us in at Halamshiral after…” He trailed off.

“We must try to make it back to Val Royeaux,” the old soldier said, then looked at Celene and hastily said, “unless the empress wishes us to do otherwise.”

“What?” The young soldier was near tears. “We can’t get past Gaspard’s men! We barely escaped before! We’re not scouts!”

Michel glanced at Celene, a tiny wordless question in his look. She could have ignored it, could have let him take charge and claimed to have a clear conscience … but that way led to trouble.

And besides, it was beneath the honor of the empress.

“Then what will you do?” she asked, and the steel in her voice silenced the men. “When Gaspard’s men find you, what will you do? When they ask you where your empress is going, when they ask you what you know, or where you saw her, what will you tell them to save your life?”

The younger man gave her a hopeless look. “I … I…”

Celene grimaced. She knew the answer as well as the young man did. It made it easier, though no less grim. “Do it,” she said to Michel.

The old soldier shut his eyes as Michel’s blade cut down the youth. The other soldier raised his own blade, and Michel knocked it aside, then cut him down as well. It was shockingly fast, the speed from which silence became a crash and a cry.

The old soldier had not moved. He opened his eyes to see the blade a hair’s breadth from his throat.

“I am no scout,” he said, looking at Celene, “but I am a soldier, and I have known no other empress but you. I will go where you order. I will fight Gaspard’s men to the death. And if they take me alive, I will tell them nothing.”

“Even after my champion killed your friends?” Celene asked, and looked down at the three bodies lying still on the trail.

“They were good comrades.” The old soldier’s voice shook, but his gaze was steady on Celene. “But my oath is to you, Your Radiance, not them. I die for you, not them. And if you need to know that no man knows which path you have taken, I will die for you now.”

Celene looked at Michel, whose eyes were on the old soldier and whose blade shone silver in the hazy afternoon light.

“Go,” she said, “and if you find your way to Val Royeaux, tell your commander that you left as a pikeman and returned as the empress’s personal scout.”

Michel’s blade went back into its sheath. He didn’t look at Celene as the old soldier bowed, and swallowed, and hurried off into the trees.

“I know,” she said when the old soldier was gone. She could feel Michel’s silent objection from yards away.

He shook his head. “It is hardly my place, Majesty.” A different man might have valued his duty over his loyalty and cut the man down before Celene could object, keeping her safe against her wishes.

In that moment, she valued Ser Michel more than ever. “It is absolutely your place until I order otherwise.” Celene sheathed her dagger. She hadn’t realized she still had it. “Yes. It would have been safer to leave none of them alive to tell of our whereabouts.”

“But he was loyal to you,” Michel said, “unlike these cowards. And while I will always urge you to safety, I understand the worth of a single loyal man right now.”

Celene’s legs burned from riding, and her back ached as well. She slid down from her horse and stretched, grimacing. This spot with its three dead men was as good as any for a short break.

It was not as though three more dead soldiers would greatly change the balance of the scales.

“How many died for me this morning, Michel? In that field?” she asked. She finished her stretch, then swore, whipped out her dagger, and sank it two fingers deep into a tree with an angry stab. “Or in the elven slums, as I sought to silence rumors with blood?”

“Majesty, you know the elves did not die for you.” Michel dismounted and started dragging the bodies off the trail. “They died for their own blind selfishness. Whatever your reasons, they rebelled, and your actions were entirely justified. And your soldiers died for you with honor, killed by a traitor who will die for his crimes.”

“But they still died, Michel.” Celene yanked her dagger free and wiped it on her sleeve. Her eyes burned, but she would not shame herself by weeping. Her head was pounding, as it always did until she had her afternoon tea. “Not for honor and glory, not to defend Orlais from darkspawn or foreign invaders, but as part of the Game. They died because Gaspard beat me.”

Michel did not look up from his work. “You fought at a disadvantage, Majesty.”

“Michel, I rule the empire.”

“Yes.” He looked up for a moment and grinned. “And you know what that means. You must actually rule, while Gaspard merely watches from the crowd like a thin-blooded courtier watching a tournament, telling the world that *he* might have done better were *he* in the saddle. And besides…” He went back to dragging the bodies. “He has not beaten you until he is crowned.”

“No. He beat me.” Here in the forest, she could admit that. And that may have been the part that hurt her most of all. She would never match Gaspard in a duel, would likely never outride him. While she had cajoled and charmed, Gaspard could lead by example, inspiring those who followed him. Celene’s wits, her mind, her skill with the Game: these had been the weapons she had wielded, confident that in a fight on those terms, she would always prevail.

Until today.

“Perhaps he should take the cursed throne and see what joy it brings him.” Her voice was but a whisper.

The last body clanked as Michel shoved it under a bush, and he looked over at her. “I’m sorry, Majesty. I’m afraid your words were lost in the clatter. With Jader blocked, I recommend we find some way back to Val Royeaux.”

Yes, for any disagreements she might have with him on matters of politics, Celene could have asked for no better man as her champion.

She cleared her throat. “Lydes is loyal to Remache. We cannot risk passing through the city.”

“Verchiel?” Michel asked.

“Also risky, but we cannot go around the whole of the Waking Sea.” Celene frowned. “If we take too long, Gaspard will seize Val Royeaux in my absence. He has enough loyal nobles to do it.”

“Agreed,” said Michel. “And were I Gaspard, I would be expecting you to head north for the Waking Sea. My men would be searching for you there.”

“Southwest?” Celene asked. She would have given half the Heartlands for a map right then. In this part of the Dales, grassy plains were dotted with small patches of forest, where the Dalish elves hid like bandits. There were countless small villages and a great deal of farmland, none of which would help her right now. “Past Lydes, and then north to Verchiel?”

“Excellent, Majesty.” Michel swung himself up into the saddle. “If you are ready.”

They crossed the Imperial Highway, riding quickly back into the woods after Michel gave the word that the long stretch of ancient road was clear for miles in both directions. The Frostback Mountains were a tiny smudge off to the east, and smoke still rose from Halamshiral itself ahead of them to the west.

With her course now set, Celene could almost enjoy the beauty of southern Orlais. Instead of bouncing in a coach, catching glimpses of the road through the window, she could see the vast woods and smell the leaves going crisply golden with the fall. With a tiny smirk at herself, she remembered that she had wished she were riding on horseback, not so long ago. She would be more specific in the future.

From time to time, Michel would raise a hand, and then he and Celene would dismount, holding the horses still and remaining quiet as Gaspard’s men rode by. For all Celene’s training, Michel’s senses were keener than hers here. She might be able to tell when a lyre was ever so slightly out of tune, but Michel caught the hoof beats long before she did.

At times, they followed a small animal trail, but when a group of Gaspard's men came their way on that, they disappeared off even that trail, blades drawn as the riders passed close enough for Celene to note the family emblems on their tabards. Remache's men, reinforcing Gaspard from Lydes.

Then they came to the edge of the woods, and Michel swore very quietly. Coming up behind him, Celene quickly saw why. A gentle hill ahead swelled up to a great grass-covered summit. At the top, a troop of Gaspard's men looked down with a wonderful view of the surrounding area.

"Do we go back?" Celene asked, keeping her voice low.

Michel shook his head. "To where? We know they are searching behind us. I suggest straight south." He pointed to a dried riverbed near the edge of the forest. "If we stay low, and move quickly, we may yet pass unseen."

Celene nodded. "When you are ready, then, my champion."

He let out a low chuckle. "I fear that if we wait until I am ready, we will be caught in the first snowfall of winter. I would suggest waiting until nightfall, but I would not risk the horses in the darkness."

"Let us go, then."

They walked the horses now, with what seemed like exaggerated care, though Celene knew from watching Michel how well sounds could carry for those trained to listen. Riders swept around them, closer now. She heard no cries, no sign that the riders had any idea where she was, but her heart pounded nevertheless. It was one thing to know how many men Gaspard had under his command. It was another to have to sneak by them.

Then they were at the edge of the woods. Michel took the reins and, with a grace surprising in a man so heavily armored, led both horses down into the dry riverbed. Celene followed, moving low through the tall grass. Her stolen horse danced nervously until Cheritenne whickered and nudged him along. She felt the itch of eyes upon her, and though she knew it for nothing more than her body's fear, she dared not look back up the hill.

Finally, she joined Michel, who was already in the saddle. She mounted, looked back to ensure that they were blocked from view, and then started

riding.

And for all that, they rode less than a minute before their third encounter.

They rounded a bend, moving the horses at a trot, and found themselves face to face with a pair of elves who had doubtless found themselves sneaking through the riverbed for the same reason Celene and Michel had.

The elves were crouched behind a fallen tree trunk that offered partial cover. One of them was a Dalish mage, judging by the tattoos that marked his face and the green-glowing staff he held ready.

The other was Briala.

Briala's face was stained with sweat and dust, and her forehead was marked with scratches that had likely come from rushing through thick foliage. She wore the drakeskin armor Celene had given her, with a cheap brown cloak over it.

Her lovely bow was raised, an arrow nocked and ready to fire at Celene's heart.

For a moment, no one moved.

Celene thought of a hundred things to say. She thought of the daggers tucked into sheaths at her forearms, of the poison almost certainly adorning the arrow's tip. She thought of the bars on the prison coach, the ache in her legs from riding. Her neck itched, and she almost laughed at the urge to scratch it.

Then Briala lowered her bow. "Celene."

Celene let out a long breath. "What were you doing coming this way?"

"Looking for a clan where we might lose ourselves," the Dalish elf said. "What are *you* doing coming this way?"

"Gaspard has blocked Jader," Celene said without hesitation, "and as he controls Lydes as well, we had hoped to circle around."

Briala nodded, seeing the sense of it. "Then we wish you good luck on your journey." Her Dalish companion raised an eyebrow.

"You're not joining us?" Ser Michel asked, an incredulous smile on his face.

Briala looked at him directly. “Last night, Celene arrested me, as I believe you know. It was just before she burned Halamshiral.”

“Just before I put down the *rebellion*, yes.” Celene straightened her shoulders in the saddle. “As I was forced to do once Gaspard started spreading rumors about my soft treatment of the elves.”

“And throwing me in prison?” Briala asked. Her voice was calm, but her great dark eyes shimmered with anger and hurt.

Celene sniffed. “Had you been there, you would have suggested the option yourself as a way to protect my reputation from Gaspard and you from supporters who might see you as an inconvenience to be silenced.”

Briala said nothing, but the Dalish elf cocked his head, curious.

“You’ll never make it to Val Royeaux on your own,” he said. “This Gaspard fellow *really* wishes to find you.”

“I imagine he does.” Celene smiled. “But even if he does not, he will turn to Val Royeaux and claim it in my absence, at which point you will lose any chance you have of winning my favor.”

The Dalish elf grinned. “You wear stolen armor and ride a stolen horse, *shemlen*. You have no empire at the moment, and your big offer is your *favor*?” He turned to Briala. “I like her.”

“The armor and the horse belonged to an Orlesian soldier, and as such, they were in truth always mine. As for my power…” She smiled thinly. “If the Dalish support me—harass Gaspard’s men, lure him into fighting here, and then get me to Val Royeaux before he can make his claim for the throne—you will see what my generosity can bring.”

“That’s awfully vague,” the elf said. “Last time the elves made a deal like this, they got the Dales. Well, at least until your people decided to declare an Exalted March and take it back.”

“Gaspard will drown the Dales in blood to be rid of you forever.” Celene looked at the sky to the west, where Halamshiral still smoked. “And if he doesn’t, you’ll be lucky to survive whatever madness the templars and the mages come to without a firm hand to keep them in check.”

“What are you prepared to offer?” the elf asked.

“A chance for your leader to convince me that the Dalish are worth the fits it will cause among my nobles if I allow elves to help,” Celene said evenly. “Anything more is for your Keepers’ ears.”

The Dalish elf was silent, staring at her as if weighing her.

Finally, Briala nodded. “We need to move. Gaspard has scouts, and even a blind dwarf could follow the trail you’re leaving. We’ll need to avoid the villages and the larger farms as well—he could have men anywhere. Felassan, can they keep the horses?”

“If they are unused to walking, they will need them.” The Dalish elf looked at Ser Michel. “Pleasure to see you again, Michel.” He and Briala left the clearing, heading south, and Michel and Celene followed, their horses crackling through the dead leaves with each step.

“I expected her to leave,” Michel said quietly.

“And yet your sword stayed in its sheath this time.”

Michel smiled. “You have surprised me before, Majesty. And I am pleased to have been wrong.”

“As am I,” Celene said, looking at her lover ahead on the trail. “As am I.”

9

Briala walked south toward Felassan’s Dalish clan.

She had dreamed of them as a child—the mythical elves who lived alone with no humans to rule them. It had been as fantastical and impossible as stories of the Fade. On days when Celene had been cruel, she imagined living among them as a princess, forcing Celene to clean her clothes. On days when Celene had been kind, she imagined both of them playing in a land where spirits did the cleaning, and nobody was a servant.

As Briala had grown older, she had, like most elves, entertained the occasional thought of running off to find the Dalish. Everyone claimed to have a friend who had a cousin who had left the alienage or the lord’s house and found the legends of the Dales, only coming back briefly with fine clothes and mystical face-tattoos. But as a servant in Celene’s family’s household, Briala had gotten to hear stories about the raids, the hidden trade routes, the banditry, and the plans to wipe out the renegade elves that lived in the forests to the south. She had realized that they were just another group. There was no magical spirit realm. There were no princesses.

Then came the day in the reading room, and her flight to the Dales. And Felassan.

She looked over at him. They had been walking for more than a week now, adding to the food in Ser Michel’s pack what she and Felassan could bring down in the forest, and her mentor showed no sign of fatigue. Behind them, Celene’s face was lined with pain after long days in the saddle, and

even Ser Michel showed some discomfort, though he hid it behind his chevalier stoicism.

“What will they think of us?” she asked Felassan, and he looked over, one eyebrow raised. “Your people?”

“The Dalish.” Felassan let out a slow breath, thinking over the question. “We’ll have to gain their loyalty clan by clan. They don’t have much contact with each other. Don’t want to risk an attack from the *shemlen* compromising the safety of more than one clan. Of course, staying deliberately separated has led to clans growing more and more different, losing their commonalities. I imagine that’s a metaphor for … something.” Felassan smiled. “It will be interesting to see.”

“Interesting.” Briala looked back at Celene and Michel, who were just out of earshot, if Briala kept her voice down. “That’s an understated way of phrasing it.”

“Accurate, though.” Felassan smiled as a falling leaf twirled past his face. “A thunderstorm is interesting. A wildfire is interesting. I have stood in the middle of both and watched things change.”

“You do not think your people will help Celene?”

“Why in the world would the Dalish help a *shemlen*?”

“Because she has helped them.” Briala felt her hands clench into fists and relaxed them with an effort. “How much better are the elves of Orlais because of her rule?”

Felassan sighed. “You make two mistakes, *da’len*.”

“I apologize, *hahren*. What are my mistakes?”

“You say that she has helped the elves of Orlais,” Felassan said. “This is untrue. What gains they have made are due to your work, not hers.”

“With respect—”

“Oh, stop.” His voice was patient but firm, and he did not look over at her. “Without you, your empress would have been no friend to the elves. Even her rival Gaspard could see that.”

Briala ducked her head. “But if their lives are better, does the cause matter?”

“There was a young noble in fair Arlathan,” Felassan said, “and it happened that the elven king lost one of his two daughters to a serpent’s bite. At the ceremony to commemorate her life, the young noble saw an elven lady so fair and perfect that his heart broke—but by the laws of ancient Arlathan, he was forbidden to speak with her during the ceremony, and he did not learn who she was, so he could not ask her family to court her. The young noble prayed to the gods that he might meet the elven lady again. He prayed to Mythal for love, to Dirthamen for the secret of the elven lady’s name, and to Andruil for luck in the hunt for this woman. And finally, he made an offering to Fen’Harel … and the Dread Wolf was the only one who answered. In a dream that night, he told the noble what he needed to do to see his heart’s love again. Do you know what he said?”

After a moment’s thought, Briala sighed. “Kill the king’s other daughter.”

Felassan chuckled. “You begin to think like Fen’Harel.”

“It was only logical,” Briala said. “There would be another ceremony, and—”

“It was a compliment, *da’len*.” Felassan shook his head. “Causes matter. To understand the truth of events, you must understand why as well as what occurred. The elves of Orlais are better off, but the cause is you, not her.”

“But they *are* better off.” Briala sighed and stepped over a twisting root. “You said that I made two mistakes. What was the second?”

Felassan looked over, and behind the lines of the *vallaslin*, the expression on his face was one of very old sadness. “You think of elves as the *shemlen* do. Blood or no blood. Knife-ears or flat-ears. You say that *they* are better off under Celene’s rule. Who are they? The alienage elves? The Dalish?” He smiled. “And why must the Dalish care for the fate of the elves who live in the cities?”

After that, they walked for a time in silence.

* * *

Celene endured the ride with grim resolve.

She still wore her own boots and underclothes, which had been custom tailored to fit perfectly. The stolen armor chafed, but after the first night, she padded the sections that did not fit with skill learned from emergency dress repair at the balls of her youth.

There was nothing to do for sore muscles, however, and so she bore the aches in her legs, thighs, and back. And when she would have asked that they stop and rest, she instead thought of Gaspard and ran through the two-score muscle exercises that Lady Mantillon had taught Celene to allow a young lady to remain poised and beautiful while standing in full view of a crowd filled with rivals who would seize on any awkward shift as a sign of weakness.

At night, when Michel and Briala's Dalish elf allowed them to stop, Celene stretched and then ran through drills with her daggers. She carried more magic on her wrists and throat and fingers than most outside the Circle would see in a single lifetime, including both the ring Lady Mantillon had given her and the ring that sent flames licking out of any weapon she wielded. That magic had given her sufficient strength and skill to kill a few unsuspecting soldiers.

Against Gaspard and his chevaliers, though, Celene would need to be better. And for all she knew, she might well be facing Gaspard himself before this was finished.

She was at the edge of the clearing in the firelight a fortnight later, running through a set of drills that Lady Mantillon had called *the Butterfly* while Felassan and Michel plotted tomorrow's ride, when Briala said from behind her, "You're off on the second strike."

Celene stopped and looked over her shoulder, hiding with a close-mouthed smile how sadly out of breath the exercises had left her. Briala had stripped off her armor and looked tired, dirty … and still lovely nevertheless, even as little more than a shadow kissed with golden light from the campfire.

It was the first time that Briala had spoken to Celene beyond the simple logistics of which trail to follow or when to take the rabbit off the fire.

Celene had given her lover her space, waiting for a sign.

“I don’t believe so,” Celene said, keeping her voice calm and non-argumentative. “The lead hand parries the incoming thrust, and the back hand slashes across the upper arm to stop a counterattack before you move in to control the throat with both blades.”

She demonstrated in the air, her daggers catching the firelight as she slid them through the air against an imaginary opponent. There was no actual fire on the blades—she had removed all her magical tokens to get a better sense of how far out of practice she was.

“No.” Briala slid her own daggers out with unconscious grace, then sliced through the air. “The first isn’t just a parry. It’s a slash to the enemy’s wrist. The second strike isn’t to his striking arm. It’s to the throat.” Her strike was higher than Celene’s had been, a fast flick of the wrist whose grace and deceptive beauty gave *the Butterfly* its name. “That ensures that you’re in close enough to control the throat with your next move.”

“You’re certain? You always preferred Lady Mantillon’s archery lessons to the knife-work.”

“But I have used both,” Briala said. “And it is the throat.”

Celene smiled. “If you’ve already slashed their throat, *controlling* it hardly seems necessary.”

“Armor?” Briala asked. “Or magical protection? Or if you’re facing a darkspawn with tougher skin, or some creature from the Fade? Or if you’re using a peasant’s belt knife instead of a gleaming silverite blade because you’ve lost your throne?” She stepped in closer, and anger touched her face, drawing lines on her beautiful skin. “Things in the real world are often not as perfect as they are in the palace at Val Royeaux.”

Celene sighed. “Bria…”

“*Damn* you, Celene.” Briala’s big beautiful eyes filled with tears. They caught the light from the fire, shimmering in the darkness like a cat’s as Briala stepped closer. The pulse in her neck fluttered fast, though she moved as gracefully as always. “Don’t explain it. I know why. I just wished you had cared more.”

“It would have been a locked suite in the palace for a few years, nothing more!” Celene kept her voice low, aware that Michel and Felassan had stopped planning and were looking their way. “It would have changed *nothing* for us.”

“Your hair still stinks of the smoke from the people you burned,” Briala said. “That is a change.”

The dead leaves crackled under Celene’s feet as she stepped forward. “How many wars can our empire survive in such a short time? I wanted my legacy to be the university, the beauty and culture that made us the envy of the world. Instead, I may be known as the empress under whom Orlais fell. You have the *luxury* of mourning Halamshiral’s elves and holding my heart hostage. Sitting on my throne, I see every city in the empire. If I must burn one to save the rest, I will weep, but I will light the torch!”

Briala swallowed. “You’re not weeping, as far as I can tell. Nor are you sitting on your throne.” She stepped away, her movements fast and jerky. “With your permission, *Your Radiance*, I shall go indulge myself in my luxury.”

Celene watched her lover stalk back to the campfire.

Then, because Briala had been right, Celene went back to practicing, and aimed her second strike higher.

The next morning, they left the gold-and-red of the woods and skirted the edges of farmsteads already bare in anticipation of the autumn chill. After days in the woods, darting from one open area to the next with an eye out for Gaspard’s men gave Celene pause.

Celene looked at the sky, which showed high clouds and the promise of a chilly day. “Is it safe to be out in the open?” she asked Michel.

“I fear we have little choice, Majesty.” Michel looked across the plains, eyes scanning the distant horizon. “To stay in the safety of the forest, we would have to circle far to the east. That gives Gaspard too long to find us. The farms and plains should be safe enough this far from where Gaspard would expect to find us. There’s a small village near a lake up ahead that’s far removed from any major roads. It should be safe to get supplies and

information, according to Briala's knife-ear." He grimaced at the mention of Felassan, darting a look at the elves up ahead.

"You don't trust him?"

Michel frowned. "He's said nothing yet to mistrust … but he's Dalish. He's as much an enemy to you as Gaspard and his men." He chuckled. "Though at least he has the courtesy to let us know with those ridiculous tattoos."

Celene had read more than one treatise on the Dalish. The university did not think the Dalish worth a class of their own, but they were studied in history courses covering all of Thedas. She thought she remembered that the tattoos Michel mocked were signs to honor one or another of their ancient gods. She had always found their culture interesting, exotic, and infinitely sad. How much knowledge had been lost to scholars the world over because the Dalish had refused to admit that their empire had fallen? How long would they hide in the wilderness before acknowledging that the world had changed?

"We are safe, though, to the best of your knowledge?" Celene asked.

"Yes." Michel was still scanning the distant horizon. "Felassan said that if Gaspard's soldiers were patrolling the area, they would have sent the birds wheeling in the sky."

"How very elven of him." Celene smiled. "Then if we are free, let us make use of our mounts. We can wait for Briala and Felassan in the village."

She kicked her mount's flanks without waiting for a response, and the gelding, after a moment's confusion, broke into a gallop. They thundered past the elves, Briala shooting Celene a shocked look, and then Celene was alone on the plains.

The gelding had been skittish and prone to bolt to begin with. Once it became clear that this was no panic, no battle, but simply a chance to run, it embraced the ride. Celene felt his smooth stride, the bunch and flow of liquid muscles sliding smoothly as the grass whipped her legs. She clung to

the reins, hunched forward with the smell of cold wind and wet horse in her nose, free for the moment of everything but the ride.

After a time, when she felt the gelding tire, she let him slow back to the fast trot that he could likely maintain for hours at a time, though Celene's legs would regret it later. Up ahead in the distance, she saw the silvery glint of the small lake and the huddled buildings around it. A slash of dirt through the grass from the northwest marked the small road from Halamshiral.

She heard hoof beats behind her, and a moment later, Michel dropped his charger to a trot as well, patting Cheritenne on the flank. She half expected some word of censure from her champion for galloping off without warning, but he simply gave her a tiny smile and shook his head. She found herself almost disappointed. Debating an empress's right to take a frivolous ride would have been a lovely way to pass the time.

A moment later, Michel stared at the village in the distance, frowning.

"Something is wrong," he finally said.

"What is it?"

He squinted. "There are fields to the west and north, but they haven't been harvested. The crops will be wasted if they're not out of the ground soon. And if the lake holds fish, there should be boats on the water at this hour."

"Why, Ser Michel, how very rustic of you to notice such things." Celene chuckled. "One would think you grew up in a village yourself."

Michel blushed. "It is my duty to notice, Majesty. I could be wrong."

"I doubt it, my champion. Shall we wait for Briala and Felassan?"

At her suggestion, Michel grimaced. "Elves in a village like this … they may do more harm than good. Perhaps the village deals with the Dalish, but perhaps they attack elves on sight as Dalish raiders."

Celene nodded and looked back to where Briala and Felassan were specks in the distance. "Then let us continue on our own, with care."

They rode in at an easy trot, joining the road and coming into the village from the northwest. As soon as they passed the low fences that passed for

the village's defenses, Celene could see the wrongness.

The village was silent, and it smelled of ashes. The wooden buildings, simple but sturdy, with fresh thatching in preparation for the coming winter, were whole and undamaged, but as they rode into the open dirt clearing that marked the village square, Celene saw not a single soul.

"Pyres." Michel pointed, and Celene saw stacks of charred black wood in the center of the square. There were too many to count, some large enough for a group, and some small and ringed with stones to mark a peasant's Chantry burning.

"Their loved ones in Chantry fires, and the attackers burned as a group." Michel nodded, then raised his voice and called out, "Hello the village! Anyone here?"

There was a long moment of silence, broken only by shutters rattling in the wind.

Celene shook her head. "Someone must have burned the bodies."

She saw the spear from the corner of her eye and turned, but it sailed wide, missing her and Michel by yards. It had come from one of the shops behind them, but she could not be certain which.

"I have no quarrel with you," Michel called out, "but I am sworn to protect this lady. Threaten her, and as a chevalier, I swear that I will burn your village to the ground." He drew his sword and rode slowly toward the buildings. "Come out, and I swear no harm upon you."

They came out.

Commoners. Peasants. An old man in butcher's leathers. A matronly woman with a sloppily bandaged arm. Children peeking out from behind doors and windows. Celene took them all in with her gaze, committing them to memory. Their clothes were dirty. Their eyes were hooded with fatigue and fear.

She would see Gaspard die for this.

"They came back before the harvest," said the butcher. "Rode in and took what they wanted. We didn't give them any trouble, my lord."

"Did they say why?" Michel asked. He had sheathed his sword.

“Not at first,” said the matronly woman. By the flour on her clothes, Celene guessed her to be a baker. “But when they were deep in their cups, they said that they were to watch for trouble from Jader.”

“Jader.” The butcher spat. “Two days ago, Lady Seryl’s men rode in and cut down every man and woman working the fields. Killed our guards, killed everyone in the village square. When they’d finished killing the other soldiers, they fired arrows out onto the water, killed most of our boys in the boats. They took all the food they could find. They *spent the night*.” A collective flinch splashed across the crowd. “Said we had been assisting enemies of the throne, that this was a lesson to anyone who’d help Gaspard’s men.” At the last, his voice broke. “My lord, I don’t even know who Gaspard *is*.”

Celene looked around the village square. She saw the tiny scorch marks, the spots where the blood hadn’t fully soaked into the earth. The men from Jader. Loyal to her, fighting for her throne. She swallowed.

“You need to bring in the harvest,” she said.

Michel turned to her, one eyebrow raised slightly.

“I understand that you are scared. There are nobles fighting in battles that have already hurt you.” She looked at the pyres in the park. “But you must bring in the harvest. You must go back out on the lake and bring in the fish. Otherwise, you won’t survive the winter.”

“Half of our village is dead, my lady,” the butcher said, his fists clenched and his face red, though he kept his eyes on the ground.

“Then that’s less food you’ll need,” she said. “But you need to get back to work, nevertheless. Unless you wish to lose the *whole* of your village.”

“And if they come back?” the baker asked, scratching at her bandaged arm.

“Welcome them with open arms,” Celene said without hesitation. “Bow to them, whichever noble they say they serve. Give them what food they ask for, and hide enough so that you’ll survive even if they take a great deal.” She looked at the baker. “And if they *spend the night*, throw them a feast, fortify the wine, and slit their throats as they sleep.”

The baker looked up, surprised, and then nodded.

“And what of you, my lord and lady?” the butcher asked. He was sweating, though the morning air was cool. “What would you have of us?”

Celene met his nervous look with a steady stare. “Only what you can spare.”

They rode back out of the village a short time later and found Briala and Felassan by the road.

“Are you all right?” Briala asked Celene, and Celene flinched. She had clearly become too used to hiding behind the masks, if her face gave her away so easily.

“We’re fine,” Michel said roughly. “The village is a waste. Come on. We need to keep moving.”

Celene nodded and followed him as they circled well around the village and headed south. She watched it as they rode, looking back every few moments until it was a speck in the distance, with a tiny glimmer of the lake next to it.

When it was gone, finally, she turned and let out a sigh.

“You spoke well, Majesty,” Michel said without looking over.

“I did not even learn the name of the village.”

“It does not matter.” He grimaced. “Their story is one of dozens. Every soldier who has served in battle has seen it, at one time or another.”

“And Gaspard knew.” Celene felt her jaw clench and released the tension. At court, they would have tittered at her lack of control. But then, they were so very far from court today. “He so desires the throne that he would put countless lives through that.”

“I don’t know that it ever occurred to him, Majesty.”

“We will end this.” Celene gripped the reins until her fingers ached. “My people deserve better.”

Michel said nothing, but he nodded solemnly, and for a while, that was enough.

* * *

In his camp southeast of Halamshiral, Gaspard sat on a sturdy collapsible chair by one of the crackling fires and drank hot spiced wine while taking reports from his scouts.

“Who knew Lady Seryl had it in her?” he asked Remache. “Destroying her own villages just to burn us out of them. Impressive woman.”

“Indeed.” Remache frowned. “And the report from that little village … What was it? You say the scouts saw hoof prints?”

The scout nodded respectfully. “*Lac d’Argent*, my lord. The villagers insisted that they had seen no one, but my men saw hoof prints that they swore came from a well-shod warhorse and not some farmer’s old mare.”

“Well,” Gaspard said, nodding, “it’s something. First damned hint we’ve had of her in any village or town.” They needed *something* to go on, and it wouldn’t be Celene’s elven handmaid, who had earned several guards a whipping with her daring escape.

Remache sniffed and pulled uncomfortably at the neck of his riding leathers. “You can direct this war from Val Royeaux, my lord. Are you certain it is seemly for you to chase Celene yourself?”

They’d been riding lightly, checking the most likely locations where Celene might try to hide. It was hardly a forced march. And still, Remache acted like Gaspard was dragging him through the Deep Roads.

Gaspard nodded to the scout commander, who bowed and retreated from earshot. “Sitting in Val Royeaux, I’d be surrounded by Celene’s nobles trying to fight me, arguing that Celene could still be found, and that I had no right. Meanwhile, my nobles would be demanding to know what was in it for them,” he said, sipping his wine, “and threatening me with vague waves of the hand if I didn’t do things their way. We can afford a few days to search. If I come back with Celene dead, no man in this empire will get in my way.”

“But for now,” Remache pointed out, “Lady Seryl *is* in your way. You took Halamshiral by surprise, but you do not have all your forces. I doubt you can take Jader if Lady Seryl is prepared for you, and we have run into more of her scouts each day.”

“Do you have a suggestion, Remache?” Gaspard asked. “Or are you just pissing in my wine?”

Remache pursed his lips. “Put out word that Celene is dead. Go back to Halamshiral, gather your forces, and march to Val Royeaux with your armor shining. If she shows herself to fight your claim, kill her. If not…” He gestured casually. “Once you sit upon the throne, she may complain from exile like a barking dog, for all the good it does her.”

Gaspard grunted. “I will not say that she is dead, not when I do not know it.”

“You said she was sleeping with her elven handmaid,” Remache said, raising an eyebrow.

“I *suggested* it was possible. And in any event, that was the Game,” Gaspard said, dismissing it with an absent wave. “This is honorable battle. There is a line that no chevalier will cross.”

“Gaspard.” Remache said it bluntly, and Gaspard looked over, surprised that Remache had it in him. “The nobles allied to your cause came to help you seize the throne, not kill the empress. You wish to justify your claim to the throne? Make your way to Val Royeaux and prove to them that you can rule.”

A call came before Gaspard could reply, and he sat up as one of his scouts came into the firelight. “My lord! We found an enemy soldier in the woods and took him alive. By his colors, he belonged to the empress, not Jader.”

“Good man. Bring him here.” The scout bowed and left at a jog, and Gaspard gave Remache a grin. “Or perhaps our luck is changing.”

Remache raised an eyebrow. “He’s much more likely a simple deserter than one of her cohorts, Gaspard.”

“That’s why we question him.”

Gaspard heard the rattle of armor as the prisoner was brought into the firelight, one of his men at each arm. The soldier was a grizzled old veteran, and his padded tunic was marked with both old blood and new, showing that he hadn’t been taken without a fight.

“Bring him closer. Into the light.” His men did as he commanded. Gaspard set his cup down by the fire, stood, and squinted at the man thoughtfully. Finally, he said, “How’d they find you?”

The soldier ducked his head. “I was hungry. I caught a fish by the stream. Didn’t want to eat it raw, my lord, so I risked a campfire. That’s how your men found me.”

“You can train for years, fight with honor in campaigns, and still never learn how to make a campfire that won’t be seen from a mile away.” Gaspard smiled. “So, then. How did you end up here, a week’s travel from Halamshiral?”

The soldier kept his head down, but Gaspard saw the little catch at his jaw. “I fled after the battle. I thought I could make it to Jader.”

Remache made a tiny gesture, and Gaspard nodded. “I don’t think so. Men, where did you find him?”

“By a small river to the north.”

“Looking for a boat, I’d wager.” Gaspard stepped closer. “And a single man, even on foot, would have gotten closer to Jader than this. Unless you ran into the men we had blocking the roads.”

“Yes.” The soldier nodded jerkily. “I ran into your blockade, my lord. I turned back, but then I saw your forces coming, and I thought I could find a village with a boat and escape on the Waking Sea.” He could not meet Gaspard’s look, and the words were muttered fast, clearly memorized earlier as his story if he were caught.

Remache coughed, and Gaspard looked over in irritation. “Yes, I’m aware that he’s lying.” He turned back to the soldier. “It’s not a bad story, soldier, but you’re terrible at telling it. And a man in your position … I have to wonder why you’d bother lying.” He stepped closer still, until the soldier had to look up at him, his eyes baggy with fatigue and darting with fear. “I’d expect you to come in surrendering and asking to change sides. After all, you’re a veteran, a survivor. You know when the battle is lost. You know to back the right lord.”

He flinched at that, and Gaspard knew.

“But you won’t, will you? Because you’ve seen her,” he breathed. “In these woods. You’ve seen her. You know she’s still alive, and you know where she’s going.”

“I don’t!” the soldier blurted, and that was true, if desperate.

“But you could tell me what you know,” Gaspard said, “and see if your useful information led me to spare your life.”

“I could, my lord.” Now the lies were done with, and the soldier straightened and met Gaspard’s gaze. “But though I am no lord or chevalier, I still have my honor.” He squared his shoulders. “I am Empress Celene’s personal scout, by her decree, and I will die as such.”

Gaspard met his gaze, then nodded slowly and looked out to where his men stood waiting. He looked back at the soldier. “I can respect that. Swift and painless, or in battle?”

The soldier let out a long and shaky breath, then squared his shoulders. “In battle, my lord.”

“Good man.” Gaspard gestured to the men, and they stepped away. Gaspard wore only his riding leathers, so he didn’t need to worry about giving Celene’s soldier armor to ensure that they met on equal terms. “Swords!”

“You must be joking,” Remache snapped, and Gaspard turned on him.

“You’re a damned fine lord when it comes to the Game, Remache, and I’m going to need your help to keep my throne. But you’ll never understand men who live and die by their blades.” He held out a hand without looking and took the sword that was passed to him. Then he called out, “By my honor as a chevalier, if Celene’s personal scout defeats me in single combat, he walks away free with his armor, his weapons, and three days’ worth of food.”

His men called back their approval with a roar, banging blades on shields. Celene’s man took his blade and offered a decent salute. Gaspard returned it, soldier to soldier.

Then they moved.

Celene's man moved well and had a good eye for distance, Gaspard noted as they both took a few cautious steps. But his relaxed grip was wrong on the blade. It was a finesse grip on a weapon that needed to be held tight and swung hard. And his defensive guard suggested training with a shorter weapon. Gaspard guessed he'd been a spearman, with a short blade for close combat.

Gaspard made it quick.

A feint that the soldier tried to parry from too far away, years of pike training working against him, followed by a lunge that caught the man in the bicep, a downward slash across the leg, and, without hesitation, a thrust up through the ribs.

"Good man," he said again, holding the man up while the life went out of his eyes.

Remache had not stood up from his spot by the campfire. He smiled wryly as Gaspard came over, leaving the servants to clean the blades and dispose of the man's body. "I am pleased to see that you survived that completely unnecessary duel, my lord."

"That wasn't a duel." Gaspard sat. "It was an execution. But he died proud, fighting the man who attacked his empress in single combat."

"Yes, he looks ecstatic," Remache said, glancing over at the body. "We could have gotten more information out of him with torture." At Gaspard's look, Remache sighed. "He wasn't a noble, Gaspard. Your code would not have applied."

"He knew nothing worth knowing." Gaspard gestured for the scouts, then said quietly, "Think, Remache. If he knew where Celene was going, he would either be with her because Celene trusted him, or dead because Celene didn't."

Remache frowned, then nodded slowly. "So all we know for certain is that he definitely met her. His guilty fear of accidentally revealing something made that plain."

"Exactly."

The scouts came into the firelight, bowing. "My lord?"

“Get back to where you found him,” Gaspard ordered. “Find his trail, and follow it back. Somewhere, that man met Celene.”

“Understood, my lord.” The scouts bowed and left at a jog.

“Can they really do that?” Remache asked. “Follow a trail back for days and find where it intersects with Celene’s?”

“Damned if I know, Remache.” Gaspard picked his cup back up, squinted into it, and picked out a fly. “But I believe it’s better than trying to take Jader.”

10

Ser Michel had grown up in the slums of Montfort, and then in a noble's estate. Years of training with the chevaliers had taught him how to keep himself and his horse safe in the forests, but he had never grown to like them.

He detested them, in fact. And now, as Empress Celene followed Briala and Felassan toward the Dalish, they were leaving the plains and returning to the forest for what promised to be an uncomfortable journey.

He knew that they were vulnerable on the open plains, visible for miles in every direction. He understood that the damned Dalish made their homes in wild lands like the forests and hills. None of that changed the sick wash of dread that passed through him when he left the open air and rode into the twisted branches and dead leaves.

Felassan said they were getting close, and Michel, though no great tracker, could see the signs. The trails they rode were too wide to simply be animal trails, and the clearings where they stopped to rest hid the ashes of recent campfires under a carpet of dead leaves. The forest around them twitched and crackled and seemed to watch.

They stopped in one of the clearings that night. Briala had brought down a small deer, and Felassan skinned it with quick efficiency. Celene, to Michel's surprise, built the fire and gathered herbs from nearby to season the venison. He would have placed a strong wager against ever seeing the Empress of Orlais build a fire, but she seemed to know what she was doing.

Michel himself tended the horses. His own stallion, Cheritenne, was doing well, though he'd lost some weight. Celene's gelding was still skittish, and his coat wasn't in good condition. Michel rubbed him down as best he could with the limited equipment he had on hand. He hadn't had to care for his own horse since his training days, and his servants had carried the brushes and picks to tend to the horses each night.

"Sorry," he said, using a spare leather strap to wipe the sweat from Cheritenne's flanks. "Best we have on hand."

Cheritenne grunted, then let out a snort and lifted a leg for Michel to tend his hoof.

Michel chuckled. "I'll see what I can do." He looked through the small bag that held the tools he used to maintain his armor. A small iron pry bar might work well enough as a pick.…

"Keep the horses tied tightly tonight."

Michel blinked and looked over to see Felassan staring at him, lit with flickering gold by the campfire. The elf held a long thorny twig between his thin fingers, staring at it intently. In the firelight, the tattoos on his face seemed to twist and move of their own accord. Briala and Celene were nowhere to be seen. Likely they had gone off into the darkness to practice with their daggers.

"I know how to see to the horses." Michel turned away. "You knife-ears don't even ride."

"Neither do peasants, chevalier." Behind him, Felassan chuckled.

Michel spun, knowing that the elf was goading him, but the wave of cold dread that tightened his neck and throbbed around his temples would not be denied. "Still your tongue."

"Why? *I* didn't promise not to tell anyone." Felassan grinned at him.

With an effort, Michel unclenched his fists. The horses were whickering nervously. "What would you have of me?"

"An answer, to start. Why have you stayed with her?" Felassan asked. "Your empress's cause is desperate. You rebuilt your life once. You could

do so again, hire out your considerable skill with the sword in some town where no one ever knew you were Celene's champion."

"I swore an oath." Michel sighed. "I don't expect you to understand."

"Honor and duty? Of course not. I'm an elf, and honor and duty are concepts exclusive to heavily armored human horsemen."

Michel felt his cheeks flush. "You know nothing of the slums. My life there … The Academie gave me my honor, and the peace of knowing that as long as I am true to it, I may die with a happy heart."

"Unless your secret is revealed. How terrifying it must be to spend your life as something you do not believe you are." Felassan's voice held no mockery now. He spoke with a quiet sadness better suited to an old veteran. "All the heroic battles, the serving-girls following you to bed, and you can never truly enjoy it."

Michel checked the horses' ties, then went over and sat down heavily by the fire. "I've enjoyed my share."

"Have you? Or was some part of you holding back?" Felassan asked, twirling the thorny twig through his fingers. "Checking each word whispered by candlelight to make sure no commoner's slang slipped through? Throwing out slurs like 'knife-ear' a little too often so that no one could accuse you of having anything in common with the elves?"

"How easy it must be for you," Michel shot back, "walking around with your life tattooed on your face."

Felassan leaned back and looked up. Through the clouds, a half-moon shone dimly. "Once, my people walked this land as gods. We worked magic that would blind you with its beauty. Now, we lurk in the deep forests and prepare for the next time you *shemlen* do something that upsets the balance of this world. Do you know what I was in my time, boy?"

"A young Dalish elf who ran through the forest listening to stories?" Michel shot Felassan a look.

Felassan started, then laughed despite himself. "Well said, chevalier." After a moment, he stared into the fire and let out a soft breath. "We rode the halla. They leaped with such grace and beauty as to make your horses

look like Fereldan dogs by comparison. They were smarter, too." He chuckled. "Which often made them willful."

Michel's elven mother had told him stories about the great white deer that the elves used to ride. He had been young, five or six, and he remembered being scared. The only times he had seen people riding were when the chevaliers came into the slums to kill people.

Michel looked over at Cheritenne. It had been a long time since he had thought of that talk with his mother. He had not missed it. "I don't hear Celene or Briala," he said, to change the subject.

"They may be practicing something different," Felassan said, and waggled his eyebrows.

Michel glared at him. "That's offensive."

"Love is not offensive. Awkward, doomed, or ill-timed, perhaps, but not offensive."

"If you believe your ward can lure the empress—"

"With her elven wiles? Chevalier," Felassan said without heat, "do you think Celene could be *lured* into something she does not desire?"

Michel looked off into the darkness. "How could she desire that?"

"I cannot say," Felassan admitted. "To think she could even be tempted, after your empress burned the slums in Halamshiral…"

"I meant *Celene,* the Empress of Orlais, sleeping with an elf!"

"You *meant* nothing but to shout 'knife-ear' so that all the world would know which face you chose to wear," Felassan snapped. "And you have enough blood on your hands to be a man. Act like it."

"You understand nothing of Orlais." Michel waved at the gnarled wood of the trees around them. "Perhaps out here, you lie with whomever you like, whenever you like. In the court … It would be one thing to engage in a single dalliance, a passing fancy with one that caught her eye. But to take a servant as a long-time lover … The paramours of an emperor or empress are politically powerful in their own right. Briala holds the ear of the empress."

"Hopefully more than just the ear." Felassan grinned.

It was too much to be borne, the elf joking about Celene as though she were some tavern wench. Michel rose to his feet. He was unarmored, but his hand went to his sword. “You insult me and my empress.”

“Quite the opposite.” Felassan rose in a fluid movement, and his staff glowed green as he held it out with one hand. The other still held the twig, which Michel would have sworn twisted and shivered in Felassan’s grip. “I *need* you. So does your empress. She goes into great danger, and she needs a champion who knows who he is.” He stepped closer. “The Dalish will see the greatest of *shemlen* warriors, and their foolish young men will want a chance to try their skill against you. You need to still your temper and deny them that chance.”

“I will do as I—” Michel broke off as something in the woods cracked and crashed. A moment later, a low, rumbling roar shook the leaves in the clearing, and wind rushed past Michel carrying the stench of dead air coughing up from a crack in the ground.

“What was that?” he asked, turning toward where he thought it had come from. Another great crash sounded from behind him, along with a noise like tearing cloth, and Michel looked frantically into the trees for some sign, some flicker of movement caught at the edge of the firelight, but there was only the hideous unnatural noise.

“The reason I suggested you tie the horses tightly,” Felassan answered, and held up the thorny twig in his fingers. “This is Felandaris. A powerful poison, though it only grows where the Veil is thin.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that there is a small chance that something might have *come through*.” Felassan tossed the twig into the fire. It hissed and snapped, then crackled to ash with a wisp of green smoke.

“And you chose not to tell me this?”

“I didn’t want you to worry. It was very unlikely anything actually *would* come through.” From the darkness beyond the clearing came the tearing-cloth sound again, and another roar, and Felassan winced. “Although clearly more likely *now*.”

Michel drew his blade. “We need to get to the others.”

* * *

Celene feinted, slashed high, and rolled to the side as Briala came in with a flurry of rapid strikes. Her right blade lashed out and traced a tiny line along Briala’s armor, just above the hip.

“You’ve remembered how to move,” Briala said, panting.

They danced back and forth, blades flashing. The half-moon shone barely enough light through the trees for Celene to see. Briala was a silhouette, an ever-moving blackness moving smoothly against the deep purple-gray of the forest beyond. When they shifted position so that Briala faced the distant campfire, Celene caught glints of warm light on Briala’s armor and blades.

Celene moved in again, daggers circling. Briala lunged, and Celene caught and turned the thrust, then stepped in. Her high blade came to rest against Briala’s throat, and her low blade circled around Briala’s back, preventing any escape.

Briala let out a long breath. “Good,” she said flatly. “I believe you’ve recovered whatever skill you had lost.”

Celene stepped back and sheathed her daggers. “You used to like it when I held you.”

“Not at knifepoint.” Briala’s daggers flashed in the moonlight, then disappeared into their sheaths. She turned to go.

“Bria, please.”

She stopped, then. A silhouette, with the fire outlining her tousled hair, her long and slender ears.

“What do you want me to say?” Celene asked, taking a step toward her. “That I’m sorry? You know that I am, and we both know it changes nothing.”

“It might help to hear you care even a little.”

“You listened to Lady Mantillon’s lessons as well as I did,” Celene countered. “If I admit to regret, you would pounce upon my weakness to

remind me that my regret does the corpses little good. I would ask what *would* do some good, and you would tell me that nothing could. I will not twist in agony for your amusement because you blame me for their deaths!"

"Blame you? You killed them, Celene."

"I did." Celene kept her voice calm, though the tremor in it surprised her. "When Gaspard spread the rumor, I had to either put down the rebellion or execute you in order to disprove him and keep the throne."

On that, Briala spun. "And you chose me? Should that make me feel *better*? You killed hundreds of peasant elves to save my life?"

"I killed hundreds of peasant elves because they rebelled against my rule and endangered the empire," Celene said, voice low and pleading. "Tell me what else I should have done. Pretend it was a noble house or a merchant guild killing guards and putting barriers in the streets, and *tell me what I should have done*."

"You could have found another way!"

"Are you truly angry at me, Bria, or are you angry at yourself for knowing in the back of your mind that I did what I had to do?" Celene took another step forward. She was close enough to touch Briala now. "I swear to you, if there had been a way that left those elves unharmed, I would have taken it." She reached out slowly, carefully, and put a hand on Briala's shoulder. "How long have we been together, Bria? Do you think I never noticed you urging me to sympathy for the elves? I know how important they are to you … and I agree with you. Maker, I have seen how intelligent you are. How many elves are wasted in those alienages when they could be doing more? How many great minds and loyal servants did I burn in that slum because I could see *no other way*?" Her voice caught.

In the darkness, Briala's face was still just a silhouette. "That isn't why I stayed with you, Celene."

Celene forced a smile and shook her head. "I know. But if you are done with me, know that the elves will not suffer for it."

Her hand was still on Briala's shoulder. Briala took a breath, and after a moment's pause, her hand came up to cover Celene's. She leaned in close

enough for Celene to feel the breath on her skin as she said, “I’m not—”

With a thunderous roar of cracking wood, the tree beside Celene and Briala fell.

Celene dove away, Briala beside her, and heard more than saw the impact as a branch crashed where they had been standing. She blinked, straining her eyes to make out shapes in the darkness, and heard a terrible ripping noise coming from the ground before her.

Briala slid her daggers out. “Maker, the tree!”

Then, with no warning, Briala lurched into Celene, slamming her to the ground.

Celene scrambled to her feet as more branches crashed down around her. Blinking away the afterimages of the firelight, she took in a scene that set her heart pounding.

The trees had come alive.

All around them, great gold-leafed branches twisted into spiny arms, and tree trunks wrenched apart with terrible cracks to become angular legs. Set against a crown of the higher branches were sickly protrusions, warped knobs of wood that formed a grotesque parody of a face. The great beasts’ bodies creaked and cracked, filling the air with the smell of freshly cut wood. Every movement made Celene’s eyes water, her mind trying to make sense of something that should be impossible.

Celene could see three of the huge things, though the noise all around them suggested that more were nearby.

One of the great tree monsters held Briala aloft by the throat.

Celene went cold, felt the chill wash across her body. But years of training kept her mind free, and her fingers were deftly opening pouches and shoving her rings on, fastening the charm about her throat, even as she gaped in horror.

The one holding Briala stepped forward. As its leg lifted, roots tore out of the ground with a sound like a tapestry being ripped apart. It raised its empty arm over Celene.

“Maker take you, spirit,” Celene hissed, and slid her daggers free. “She is *mine*.”

As the tree monster brought its arm down, she stepped to the side, and then leaped nimbly onto the branch that crashed to the ground. She took two steps, running up the thick and twisting length, and leaped. Both daggers sank into the branch that held Briala, and fire danced along their length.

The tree monster roared, though it had no mouth to do so. The great noise boomed out of the bark of its skin and shook Celene’s stomach. It flailed, flames trailing in the air from the branch Celene had stabbed, and Briala fell free. As another branch swung toward Celene, she kicked off the monster’s trunk and leaped to the ground.

“Bria? Bria, get up!” Celene brandished her daggers. The tree monster before her roared again, the booming wail rattling her teeth as tiny tongues of flame smoldered along its arm, and the other two lumbered forward, each step ripping roots from the ground.

“I’m up.” Briala forced herself to her feet, though she was breathing hard.

“Good.” Celene dropped into a crouch. “I won’t lose you again.”

All three of the trees roared now as they closed upon Celene and Briala. Celene dodged a crashing branch and left a long burning slash along its length, then darted quickly between two of the creatures. They were slow, but with their strength, a single blow would be enough.

“Are you having any luck?” Briala yelled. Celene risked a glance and saw that Briala had lunged in, leaving a dozen quick slashes along the trunk of the one attacking her. They bled a sickly black sap, but the creature seemed unharmed as it raised its branches to strike again.

“Well, they’re *trees*, so … fire?” came a voice from behind them, and then a burning brand sizzled overhead, lighted in the leaf-crown of one of the creatures, and exploded with a burst of flame. The creature roared in pain, its branches popping and cracking as the fire spread.

Felassan's staff glowed green around him as he stepped over to Briala. "Beyond that, you may be out of luck. Sylvans fear little besides fire and magic."

"Their mistake." Ser Michel came to Celene's side, chopping through an upraised arm with his blade.

The creature—sylvan, Felassan had called it—roared in pain and swiped at Michel with its other arm. Michel batted the blow away with his blade, his silverite slicing through the wood, and Celene rushed in, slashing over and over at the sylvan's trunk with her burning daggers.

Behind her, another ball of fire sent a sylvan roaring back, batting at itself as its leaves shriveled to ash. Celene saw another sylvan slam an arm down at Felassan, but the ground itself rose between them and warped into a wall that turned the blow aside. Briala had fallen back and drawn her bow. She loosed arrows that split wood and sank deep into the trunks, but the creatures barely seemed to notice.

"There are more coming!" Felassan said. "So whenever the rest of you would like to leave…" He raised his staff and hurled another ball of fire at a sylvan that was already burning. It roared, staggered, and finally collapsed, flames eating it from the inside out. In the firelight, Felassan was sweating and breathing hard.

Michel stumbled on a root, then blocked a great clublike arm with his shield, staggering back. "Majesty?"

"Come on!" Celene lunged in, slashed the sylvan attacking Michel, and then darted past another great arm and fell back. "To the camp!"

The others were behind her. She heard their footsteps and breathing, fast like her own, under the sick ripping noise of the pursuing creatures. "Felassan, how long will they chase us?"

"They are spirits of rage and anger," Felassan panted, close behind her. "How long can you hold a grudge?"

Celene came into the campsite. The sylvans were behind them, but slow. "Briala, grab what you can. Michel, get the horses. Felassan, prepare more fire if—"

Then, *ahead* of her, a strangled shrieking whinny made her jump. From the far side of the camp, where the horses had been tied, came the sound of cracking wood and twisting branches.

A moment later, Cheritenne, Ser Michel's beautiful warhorse, fell into the clearing, his flanks bloodied, his legs snapped and twisted like broken twigs, with only skin holding them together. He was screaming.

Michel's yell was wordless and bloody. He flew across the camp, his longsword held in his shield-hand, and grabbed a flaming log from the fire as he passed it. Without pausing, he hurled it at the sylvan at the edge of the clearing.

As it roared in pain, flinging the flaming log away, Michel tore into it with great strikes that sprayed wood and sap through the air. Over and over he struck, still shouting without words, until a ball of fire ignited the sylvan with an explosion that sent Michel staggering back.

He turned, face flushed, and looked back at them in rage as the sylvan fell.

"Yes, yes, honor demanded you defeat it in single combat. My apologies." Felassan was leaning on his staff now, breathing hard. "Give your steed the mercy it deserves, chevalier, and then we must flee."

Celene saw that her own horse, the rangy gelding, was down and unmoving, its neck twisted at an unnatural angle. Briala quickly grabbed her pack, and Felassan stood, his staff raised, and watched the darkness at the edge of the firelight.

Ser Michel walked over to his horse. He was still screaming, but when he saw Michel, his cry softened to a whine.

Michel opened his mouth, as though his charger had asked a question he wanted to answer, and then swallowed. Then he knelt, his dagger out. "I'm sorry," he said, and finished it with a clean, fast cut.

He stood and turned to Celene. "I'll get my armor."

She nodded.

The crashing and ripping of the sylvans came from all around them now, and Felassan moved in a slow circle, taking everything in.

“How many more of those balls of fire can you throw before you exhaust yourself?” Celene asked him.

The elf smiled tiredly. “I’d love for that to remain a hypothetical question. Chevalier, are you ready?”

Michel slung his great canvas bag over his shoulder, grunting at the weight. “Ready enough.”

Celene listened to the crashing wood around them. It was growing closer, and branches twisted at the edge of the clearing. “Which way is south?” she asked.

Felassan pointed.

“Then light us a path,” Celene ordered, and brandished her daggers.

* * *

Briala had lost track of how long they’d been running.

The thick forest hid the moonlight, and they had only Felassan’s staff to light their way. The green glow twisted everything around them, making even harmless trees seem to stretch out their limbs as they ran.

Roots hidden beneath a carpet of dead leaves caught at Briala’s ankles, and bare branches scratched her face. Her armor rubbed raw at her shoulders and knees where sweat had soaked through her underclothes.

Beside her, Felassan’s tattooed face was a mask of exhaustion and pain, and he used his staff to steady his uneven jog. Celene was flushed, though she kept any discomfort hidden behind a determined glare. Only Ser Michel seemed unaffected, his breath regular and easy even as his armor clanged in the canvas bag slung over his shoulder, though his face was splotchy and red from tears. The chevalier who would kill peasants without flinching shed tears for his horse.

Behind them, wood cracked and roots ripped as the forest came to life and gave chase. Briala wasn’t sure if the sylvans were summoning more allies, or if this whole forest had been full of them to begin with, and they were awakening now that their fellows had raised the alarm. She did not spare the breath to ask Felassan.

“How much farther?” Briala gasped, nearly running into a tree and pushing off of it instead.

“There is no way to know,” Felassan said, nearly tripping on a root that caught his staff. “When they lose interest. They are…” He paused for a breath, then grunted as he stepped over a low bush. “… angered by emotion. Jealous of it.”

Emotion. She and Celene had argued. And then Celene had held her.

“We’re faster than they are,” Michel said, shoving aside branches and holding them for Celene. “If we keep going, they’ll have to give up eventually.”

Briala caught Celene’s glance. The empress still glared, but in the pale green light, her face looked sickly and pale. “I don’t know how much longer we can go.”

“No.” Celene stumbled. “I have not come this far…” She righted herself and caught up with them. “… to be killed by a *tree*.”

“Lovely sentiment. Ahead.” Felassan gestured with his free hand. “Water. It will slow them.”

Briala forced her trembling legs to a jog. She lifted her head, sucked air into lungs that ached for the breath, and missed a rock hidden under the dead leaves. It slid beneath her, and she crashed hard to the ground.

Warm hands caught her arm. Briala coughed, the leaves at her feet flecked with tiny points of light, and let herself be pulled up.

“Can you make it?” Ser Michel asked, the very model of a courtly chevalier. Behind him, pale, her hands on her knees, Celene breathed hard and looked at Briala with concern.

Briala had fancied herself to be in excellent shape. While Celene entertained artists, Briala had practiced her dagger-work in an old storeroom until sweat dripped onto the moth-eaten Fereldan rug on the floor. She had smirked at her empress, tired from a full day of riding.

Now, to her shame, Briala couldn’t spare breath to speak. She nodded quickly, and stumbled after Felassan, with Michel and Celene behind her. Behind them, the woods crashed and boomed their rage.

The water Felassan had seen—or sensed with his magic, or simply knew about because he lived here, Briala wasn't sure—was a creek. In the spring, it would have been filled and bubbling with white rushing water. Now, at the end of a long summer, with the fall still dry, it was well below its bank. Felassan hopped down the incline without hesitation, clinging to his staff for balance, then splashed through the knee-high water.

Briala followed. The dry dirt crumbled and slid beneath her feet, and she half-slid the last few feet, nearly falling into the water. She kept moving, sliding on rocks and mud, and was almost to the far side when something made her stop and turn around.

It was not sound, but the absence of sound. Behind Briala, Celene and Michel were nowhere to be seen in the shadows.

"Felassan!" Briala's throat was dry, and it came out cracked and uneven.

He was atop the far bank, on his knees and clinging to his staff with both hands. He looked down at Briala, breathing hard. "Hurry!"

"Where are they?" Briala stared in vain at the shadows atop the bank she'd just slid down. There was no sound of clanking armor, only the rip and roar of the angry forest. In the darkness, she thought she could see the trees swaying.

"Come, *da'len*!" Felassan called down. "The sylvans are almost here!"

They were drawn to emotion, he had said.

She was still angry, still hurt, still gutted by the betrayal, even as the truth of what Celene had said, the hurt in Celene's face unmasked in the darkness, fought back.

But under that, even still, was a dark, empty pit in her stomach at the thought of never seeing Celene again.

Briala swallowed and took in a long breath. Then she stumbled *back* across the creek, sank trembling fingers into the loose earth, and pulled herself back up the bank.

She was nearly blind on this side. The light from Felassan's staff only made the shadows sharper. Ahead of her, as she clawed over the lip of the bank, she saw the trees crash and fall apart as a massive sylvan tore into

view, leaves spraying away with each savage movement. It lashed out at something beside it.

It was Ser Michel. The chevalier still had his armor in the canvas bag, and now he carried his empress in both arms. Even in the darkness, Briala could see Celene's pale face, and the blood trickling from her scalp.

The sylvan's blow smashed into the armor-bag on Michel's shoulder and sent him tumbling out from the trees. He cradled Celene as he landed, then staggered back to his feet, sliding his longsword free and readying his shield now that his hands were free.

He glanced over in confusion as Briala crawled toward them. "You did not run."

"Apparently not." Briala reached Celene, checked the pulse at her throat. She was alive and breathing. "Can we retreat?"

Michel swung his longsword in a mighty arc, tearing stray branches from the sylvan's arm. "They would crush us before we reached the creek." He slapped aside a blow with a grunt. "Can you get her away safely?"

"I don't think so." One of Celene's rings summoned magical flames around any weapon she wielded. Briala fumbled at Celene's hands, shaking with exhaustion and from the unnatural booming roar.

"Majesty!" Michel shouted, leaping away from another crushing blow and hacking great chunks from the sylvan's trunk. "Majesty, you must wake!"

In the darkness, Briala could not tell the rings apart. She slid both free, then jammed them onto her own fingers.

She stood, raised her bow, drew an arrow, and nocked it. She nearly cried when the ruby ring on her hand flared, and flames lit the arrow.

"Can *you* get her away safely?" she called, and sent a flaming arrow into the sylvan's trunk. It flinched back from the flames, roaring in pain.

Michel turned back, staring in stupid confusion, and Briala nocked another arrow and fired, and then again, sheeting flame into the leaves and branches of the beast before her. "I … Yes. I can."

The trees in front of them ripped apart, and another sylvan crashed out to join its burning fellow.

Briala put a flaming arrow into the sylvan and spared one more moment to look down at Celene's lovely pale face. "Then go," she said. "I will—"

She was cut off as two-score arrows, blazing brilliantly with scarlet flame, lit the night sky and rained fire down upon the sylvans.

Briala turned in shock and saw a line of flames across the creek. They danced for a moment and lit the sky again as arrows flashed overhead and then fell among the sylvans.

Burning and booming their pain, the sylvans ripped their roots from the earth and crashed back into the forest, smashing trees from their path as they fled. Briala listened to them go, unaware until she felt the cold in her legs that she had dropped to her knees.

Michel stood beside her and Celene. "That was fortunate," he said, though it sounded more like a question than a statement.

Briala looked back at the archers across the creek. She could make out nothing, save that one of the scarlet flames burned brighter than the rest. It was near the green flame that she knew was Felassan.

Then several of them climbed gracefully up from the creek bed, simply but beautifully armored in supple leather, with scarlet fire flickering down the lengths of their ironbark blades and making the tattoos on their faces dance.

Briala stared at the first Dalish elves she had ever seen besides Felassan. *"Ma serannas,"* she said haltingly. "I owe you my life, and—"

"It's as he says!" one of the Dalish called back across the creek. "A flat-ear and two *shemlen*."

"Bind them!" came an older man's voice, and the elf before her nodded. "Kill them if they resist."

Beside her, Michel looked at Celene, then the elves. Then, with a soft laugh, he dropped his sword. "At long last, Briala, you've found your people."

11

“Why by the Dread Wolf did you bring them here?”

Thelhen, the Dalish Keeper, was an elven man of middle years. On his back was strapped the glowing red staff that had ignited his people’s arrows last night. Beneath his tattoos, his face was lined and pale with fatigue, and his hair had gone silver. Briala might have called the face kindly, were it not red with rage that morning as he yelled at Felassan in the middle of the Dalish camp while she sat, hands bound behind her, by one of their great wagons.

Felassan grinned. “You needed to meet new people.”

The Dalish Keeper made an angry gesture. “I have spent years finding the right location and preparing my spells. I have risked contact with the *shemlen* to get what I needed.”

“Well, then, if you’ve already had contact with the humans, this should be nothing!”

“Now,” Thelhen said as if Felassan had not spoken, “when I am *this* close to gaining what we need, you bring me some human noble and her champion?” Thelhen grimaced in disgust. “Clan Virnehn has sullied itself enough without your foolish ideas! And her!” He wheeled on Briala.

She kept her back straight and her eyes on him as he glared at her. “*Abelas, hahren.* I intended no disrespect.”

“Stop, child.” Her words seemed to take some of the anger out of him, and he sighed, then turned back to Felassan. “You expect me to adopt

strays? Why not send her to your own clan, if she is so valuable? Is she at least a mage?"

At that, Felassan's expression went blank. "You took what information I have given you over the years, Thelhen. That information came from her, a gift to the people she thought of as hers."

"A lovely sentiment." Thelhen wiped his face wearily. "But why is she here?"

Briala stood up straighter. "The elves of Orlais have suffered, Keeper. If Grand Duke Gaspard comes to power, they will suffer even more. If you help restore Empress Celene, you will save many of your people in the alienages of Orlais."

Thelhen shut his eyes and looked away from her. *"Abelas, da'len,"* he said quietly, "but I *have* no people in the alienages of Orlais."

Briala sat quietly then, and listened to the argument while she looked around the camp. The great wagons, the aravels, were arranged in a circle like the buildings of a small town. She could pick out the purpose of some of them. One held bows and a fletcher's tools; not far from it, Dalish children practiced shooting arrows at stump-targets painted like men. Near another aravel, crates were filled with vegetables, while smoked meat hung nearby, and behind a third wagon, Dalish warriors swung wooden blades at target dummies. Briala tracked their motions and saw that the drills were the same as she had seen a hundred times at Celene's family estate or in Val Royeaux.

They were not her people.

The words should have hurt, but Briala felt empty instead. She looked at elven children laughing and playing, elven hunters joking about their skill, elven cooks singing old songs while their apprentices cleaned up the dishes from breakfast. Through the open door of one of the wagons, she could see an old couple sleeping, snoring softly. There were no princesses, no Fade spirits whisking through the aravels to do the laundry, but it was still more than she could have ever dreamed of. None of them ducked their heads or

watched with concern for the humans. None of them feared a human walking into their camp to cause trouble.

And they let the alienages burn, because the elves in the alienages were not their people.

She came back to the argument between Felassan and Thelhen. The Dalish Keeper had finished yelling. He seemed tired. Felassan was calm, as always, and smiling faintly.

“Fine,” Thelhen said finally. “Your … apprentice … may walk the camp, though you vouch for her behavior. And her life is forfeit if she approaches the *elgar’arla.* The *shemlen* warrior remains bound, and the noble will be guarded until she awakens. I will speak with the clan elders and see whether they will hear what this noble has to say.”

He gestured irritably, and a young woman holding a slender staff of her own came over and untied Briala’s bonds. She was not yet twenty, and the tattoos on her face were fresh and sharp, a year old at most. Her fingers were deft, but callused from work. The linen of her tunic had clearly come from trade with humans, though it had been stitched in an elegant pattern Briala didn’t recognize and trimmed with fur and wire-wrapped crystals.

Briala tried to read the look the young woman gave her. It was not disgust, but it was not welcoming.

Thelhen and the young woman left, and Felassan helped Briala to her feet.

“You never told me,” she said.

“Oh, Briala, by the way, the people you’ve idolized for most of your life are actually pompous idiots.” Felassan shook his head. “Would you have listened?”

“Yes.”

“Would you have heard?” His expression did not change, and he began to walk out through the aravels. Briala followed him.

“They don’t care.”

“They do not. Well, that’s unfair. They care for the past.” Felassan pointed at one of the cooks singing in the elven tongue. She was mixing

dough in a cheap tin bowl that had been painted with icons of Sylaise the Hearthkeeper. “They care a great deal for it, in fact. They spend their lives searching for old bits to preserve and pass on. The old language, the old empire, the old secrets. But the present?” He shrugged. “The present is apparently much less exciting.”

“So while we struggle and endure and *burn*, they dig in old ruins to learn the elven word for ‘diamond’?” Briala kept her voice low as she looked around the camp.

“*Mi’durgen*.”

“I *helped* them.” This time her voice broke a little. “Not just the elves in the alienages that *aren’t their people*. I helped *them*, with what I gave you over the years.”

“I know, *da’len*. So does Thelhen, much as he hates to admit it.” Felassan glanced to the side, and Briala noted the elven hunters watching them as they left the camp and walked into the forest. “That is why you and your friends are still alive.”

“What do we do?” she asked, looking at the trees warily. In the morning light, they were just trees, the few leaves still hanging from the branches brown and dead. None looked ready to come to life and crush them. “Can we try another clan? Your clan, maybe?”

“Ah, no. My clan is nowhere near here.” Felassan winced. “Despite the name, most of the Dalish clans have fled the Dales. Scattered to make it harder for anyone to attack everyone at once. If your empress wants help getting back to Val Royeaux before Gaspard…” He shrugged. “We wait for the healers to waken her. You say that she is very persuasive. Last night, she moved the trees.” He smiled absently. “Perhaps today, she will move mountains.”

* * *

“*Shemlen.*” The elven warleader standing over Michel said it with a sneer, then grinned at his men.

Michel was bound, tied near one of the wagons. Celene lay nearby on a bedroll, with an elven girl—an apprentice mage, judging by her staff—tending her. Her color was better than it had been last night, or what little of it he'd seen last night. They had stitched the wound from where she had fallen and hit her head, and the elven girl was using healing magic to reduce the inflammation. She hadn't spoken a word to him, just leaned over Celene, her hand extended and glowing with a cool white light that made Michel's skin crawl.

The elven warriors had spoken to Michel, of course, but their vocabulary was limited.

"*Shemlen,*" their leader said again. He was a big man, broad-shouldered, with muscle on his arms that spoke of a lifetime holding a blade, and he was the oldest of the warriors standing over Michel. "Do you know what we do to your kind here? Well…" He pretended to think about it. "In truth, it depends on how much time we have. If we're in a hurry, we'll just shoot you, like a wolf with the water sickness. But if we have a few days, there's a game called Fen'Harel's Teeth."

Some of his warriors laughed along. At least one of them, though, the youngest, stopped and stared awkwardly off to the trees.

"We take your clothes and lash your hands together," the elven warleader said, "and we give you leggings of hard leather, with little nails driven through, so that every step you take sends them digging in. We give you a hundred-count head start, and we see how long you can elude us when every step you take is—"

"It must absolutely burn you that you can't touch me," Michel said, without changing expression.

The warleader blinked, then recovered. "Once Keeper Thelhen has what he needs, we'll do more than touch you, *shemlen*."

Each time he said the word "*shemlen*," there was a little pause, where he looked at Michel to see if he'd drawn blood. Michel suspected that the elf would do the same thing after a sword-thrust, and noted it in case it became relevant later.

In any case, the warleader could only be disappointed. Each time he threw that insult at Michel, it just made Michel smile more.

“And until your leader has what he wants, will you posture some more before a bound captive?” Michel asked. “Unless I become too threatening, in which case you might go scare the children or yell at the trees.”

The warleader glared. “Felassan called you a chevalier. He said they were the greatest of *shemlen* warriors. Perhaps I will show you what a true master of the blade can do.”

“Like those children playing with sticks by your wagon?” Michel gestured with his chin over to where the warriors were training. “The man you have training them drags his feet when he sidesteps. In a real fight, I’d have his leg off in three heartbeats.” The warleader glanced over despite himself, as did his warriors. “You should spend more time training your people … Or did you not notice the problem yourself?”

“You insult my clan.” The warleader raised his hand.

Michel snorted. “You insult your own clan, if you cannot control your temper to obey your master’s orders. I have given insult to neither your blood, your history, nor your way of life. Only the personal honor of a mongrel who lacks manners.”

“Nevertheless.” The warleader’s hand cracked hard across Michel’s face, and when Michel’s vision cleared, the elf was smiling again. “Know your place, *shemlen*.” He turned to his warriors. “Watch him. If he does anything suspicious, kill him.”

The warleader stalked back to his wagon, leaving the others to stand guard.

Michel settled in comfortably to wait. After a time, he performed quiet muscle exercises to keep his limbs from going numb. One of the warriors noticed—the youngest, who’d seemed uncomfortable earlier—but said nothing.

It was relaxing, almost like meditation in the Chantry, to have no duties and no responsibilities. He let his awareness wander, taking in the motions of the camp. The cooks prepared the midday meal, a stew of wild rabbit

mixed with vegetables and spices, served along with what Michel recognized from thirty yards away as peasant bread. It was almost equal parts wheat, salt, and grease, and in lean winters, it was sometimes the only thing that could put meat on a peasant's bones.

It had been years since Michel had eaten it. Watching an old elven woman drizzle honey across a piece now, he remembered his mother putting a bit of sugar on his piece, sugar she'd stolen from the tavern where she worked. His mouth watered, and he looked away.

The young warriors stopped training with blades and took up bows. Hunters came back to camp with rabbits or deer. As the hours passed, Michel was forced to admit that the camp was run well, more like a military camp than the cave full of knife-eared bandits he had expected. Every elf was busy, moving with purpose on their duties, and unlike a military camp, the people he thought of as servants weren't treated any worse than the hunters or the guards. They called happily to each other across ranks, trading greetings or jibes like a family.

Michel wasn't certain when the music started to move him, but he felt the slow relaxation ease him into a soothing rhythm as he sat and watched the camp. The music had no source, no melody. It was not even a sound, exactly. It was simply a pleasant and drowsy feeling, like being rocked to sleep by a lullaby. Even as part of his mind was confused, noting that the rest of the camp was walking and moving to the same invisible rhythm, the rest of him was calm and content.

It seemed perfectly natural when one of the warriors leaned down and cut Michel's bonds. The warrior's eyes were vacant, staring peacefully at something only he could see. The other warrior was smiling at nothing, shifting idly from side to side in a slow rhythm.

Michel stood, without fear or preparation. The healer kept tending Celene, preparing more herbs with a mortar, humming gently to herself. The warriors tapped their hands against their legs to the melody. No one seemed concerned as the warrior they had been guarding stood up, and Michel himself was not concerned, either. A voice at the back of his mind

was shouting in alarm, urging him to grab a weapon, but he ignored that part of his mind and walked calmly past the wagon where he had been kept.

As he walked, turning his back on the guards without fear, his pace was in step with the tune that the healer had been humming. The elven scouts at the edge of the camp paid him no mind. One of them was whistling the same melody to herself.

A trail led from the camp into the forest. Michel walked at an easy pace, allowing the melody to guide him along the winding path that led down a gentle slope, until the trees ended in a little clearing.

It was as if the Maker had scooped out a fistful of earth to make the clearing, leaving a bowl-shaped indentation perhaps a hundred yards across. In the center of the bowl stood a circle of stones, etched with runes that glowed faintly in the afternoon light. In the center of the circle of stones stood a human man in a dark coat. He was short and balding, with a thin black beard and glittering beady eyes.

He was whistling the tune, snapping his fingers and tapping his feet in time to the beat.

Michel was almost to the circle of stones when the runes on the nearest stone flashed.

The music spun away, torn like cobwebs, and Michel shuddered and fell to his knees. It was like waking up from a deep sleep to find himself mid-conversation. Everything seemed too sharp and bright. The grass beneath Michel's hands was cold and slick, and it felt as though the ground were twisting.

"Want to hear a joke?" the man in the circle asked. From his light accent, he could have been a minor noble in Celene's court.

Michel's whole body was shivering, and his teeth were chattering madly. He tensed his muscles, forcing his body through the centering exercises a chevalier used to fight drugs or magic. "What … what…"

"Ser Michel de Chevin walks into a tavern," the man in the circle said. "The barman looks at him and says, 'We don't serve elves here.' Ser Michel

says, ‘Fine with me. There’s no good meat on them, anyway.’” He laughed long and hard.

“What did you do to me?” Michel stood with an effort, moving into a fighting stance rather than risk trying to stand upright. The ground still tilted beneath his feet, but the centering exercises were helping. He kept his breath even and slow, ignoring the prickle of cold sweat that had broken out all over his body.

“Distracted the guards and freed you from bondage to those damned *knife-ears*,” the man in the circle said with gusto, “all as an act of charity.” He cocked his head. “Oh, specifically? A little trick from the Fade, encourages people not to notice you. Useful for getting out of troublesome situations or watching ladies undress. Not,” he added, “that I ever would. Because that would be wrong.”

Michel looked at the man, and at the circle of stones. “You’re a demon.”

“Spirit,” the man said, smiling broadly. “Please, call me Imshael.”

“Why?”

Imshael, if that was his name, smiled. “Well, you have to call me *something*.”

Michel glared. “Why did you bring me here?”

“I brought you here because you and I have a similar problem.” Imshael stepped forward until he neared the edge of the stone circle and smiled thinly. “We’d both like to be somewhere, and *someone*, we’re not.”

The demon left no prints in the grass where he walked. His black coat was finely tailored, and the buckles of his black boots glittered.

“I’ve heard of things like you,” Michel said, trying to remember the old stories. “You’re a desire demon.”

“*Choice*. *Spirit*.” Imshael’s smile never wavered. “Do I look like a desire demon? Do you want me to strip down and put on something filmy and sheer?” At Michel’s glare, the demon sighed. “There are all kinds of spirits, boy. Spirits of love, and honor, and valor, and justice…” He waved a hand absently, turning to pace along the edge of the circle. “And yes, also rage,

and hunger, and pride. We all carry some connection to this world to bring us through the Veil."

Michel began to walk around the outside of the circle, keeping pace with the demon. His body had largely recovered from whatever the demon had done, but for a little loose-limbed shakiness, as though Michel had just finished a good workout. The yellow autumn grass crumpled beneath his steps as he walked. "And what brought you?"

"Nothing, this time. Those damned elves called me here into this circle." Imshael rapped a knuckle against one of the stones as he passed it, then winced as a spark of crackling energy stung his hand. "Trapped me in here. I can't leave, and I can't return to the Fade. I can't even use my power."

Michel remembered the song that had touched the minds of everyone near him. "You used your power on the whole camp."

"What, that trick?" Imshael smirked. "No. My *power* is a bit more … consequential."

Michel was silent a moment, then gave in and asked the question. "Why have they brought you here?"

"They want me to help them regain a bit of their history. You know about history, Ser Michel?"

"Not especially, demon." Michel kept walking.

"See, you think of Halamshiral as the old elven capital, but before that, before the boys in Tevinter had their fun, the elves had a much grander place to call home."

"Arlathan."

Imshael grinned. "Ah, so you *did* listen to the lessons in the slums from your dear old elven mother!" At Michel's glare, he raised his hands in apology. "Sorry, sorry. You mortals always get touchy about those thoughts leaking out of your head. Yes, Arlathan. But that was just the capital of the ancient empire. All of this—Orlais, Fereldan, those bits over to the west—all of it was part of Elvhenan. Now, if you dig deep enough under most of Orlais, you run into the old tombs where the noble elven dead were buried."

Imshael's eyes narrowed. "And as it turns out, most of those tombs are connected by the eluvians."

Michel stopped and turned to face the demon. "There are secret passages beneath Orlais?"

Imshael snorted. "Secret passages? No, boy, you're thinking of dwarves. The elves weren't much for walking. The eluvians are magical mirrors. You walk into one of them, journey through a kind of in-between place for a bit, and come out the other side several days' ride elsewhere." The demon tapped one of the circle stones again, grimacing at the spark of energy that stung his fingers. "Old elven magic. Always have to respect old elven magic."

"And you use these to travel." Michel looked closely at the demon. There was a trap. There was always a trap. Every story that had the young man dealing with the demon *always* had the demon spring a trap.

The key was that in some stories, the young man could twist that trap back around on the demon and win the day.

"Yes, you use it to travel. Good on you for listening. You could get from Jader to Val Royeaux without seeing daylight if you wanted." Imshael stopped and shot Michel a look. "Don't get any ideas, chevalier. It's a lot of old, dangerous magic and some texts you'd probably just burn. I don't imagine there are any magic swords for you to find down there." He started walking again, still leaving no footsteps. "Regardless, the eluvians have been sleeping ever since your lads took Halamshiral. Our friend the Keeper is trying to get me to awaken them."

Michel hurried to catch up. "So why not do as he asks?"

"Deeply concerned for my welfare, are you? I'm touched." Imshael smiled, but it twisted into a snarl after a moment. "He can't give me what I need. A rage demon feeds on anger. A pride demon lives off the delusions men use when they stare in the mirror every morning. And I need a *choice*. Thelhen *wants* the eluvians awakened, but there's nothing more to it. He won't submit to the consequence of his actions. Do you understand?"

"No."

Imshael chuckled. “Honest man. Well, mostly. What if I told you that if you found me a mortal and got him to put his bleeding palm to one of these damned stones, I would make the story of Ser Michel de Chevin true?”

Michel blinked. “How?”

“More effectively than your patron, Comte Brevin, bribing a forger.” Imshael grinned, and his beady eyes glittered among a field of old laugh-lines. “A few spirits whispering in a few dreams. A few documents falsified by men who will never remember doing so. The next time one of Gaspard’s bards goes digging, she finds that Michel de Chevin is exactly who he says he is, and living men will swear by the sadly absent Maker that they remember growing up with you, the noble and honest and entirely human Ser Michel.”

“And in return?”

“I’d get to leave this damned circle and live inside the man who bled on the stone.” Imshael took a deep, happy breath. “It’s been some time since I got to see the world. I’d like to look around a bit.”

Michel stopped, teeth clenched in anger. “You would have me curse some poor creature to your possession?”

“Yes.” Imshael turned to him, and though there was a smile on the demon’s face, his eyes seemed to burn. “Not pleasant, is it? That’s what makes it *a choice*.”

Michel spun away and started walking again. He saw footprints in the grass ahead of him, and realized he’d come all the way around the stone circle. “I should destroy you.”

“Breaking a couple of the runes would do it,” Imshael said without breaking stride. “Of course, then you’d spend the rest of your life waiting for someone to find out who you really are.”

“I know who I really am,” Michel said, and left the clearing and the demon.

The scouts at the edge of the camp jumped when they saw him. Their bows snapped up with admirable efficiency, and they yelled an alarm even as they took aim, their eyes wide and bewildered as they darted glances

back toward the camp where, by all rights, Michel *should* have been tied up.

Michel raised his hands. “I surrender,” he said. “Take me back to my empress.”

For a moment, he thought they would simply shoot him, but then, after trading looks, they closed in on Michel instead. One hung back, bow still raised, while the others grabbed him and shoved him to the ground.

He endured the shouts, and punches and kicks, without complaint. If it got him back to Celene, it would be worth it.

He knew how she was going to take back Orlais.

* * *

Celene had been awakened by the elven healer in the early afternoon and informed that the others were wandering the Dalish camp. Still woozy, she had sat up, noted the guards with their weapons already drawn, and asked to speak to their Keeper. She had expected Michel and possibly even Briala to be tied up as well. Since they had only kept *her* bound, the Dalish likely understood her value as a potential hostage. That was, if not auspicious, at least a good place to start.

Now, with her head still aching and elven guards standing over her, Celene sat before the Keeper and the elders of the Dalish clan and negotiated for her life. She had no idea where Briala and Michel were, and she refused to show weakness by asking.

“Once Gaspard is put down,” she said, “I can ensure that the Dalish gain a new measure of respect in Orlais, and we look forward to learning from your wisdom. We already have elves attending our universities, and it would be an honor to allow your people to visit.”

“You do not have the strength to fight this Gaspard,” the ancient hearthmistress said, her cracked voice laced with skepticism, “yet you think to offer us help?”

“Power accumulates,” Celene said with confidence, “like a snowball rolling down a hill. I do not need you to fight Gaspard for me. I only need

you to use your skills to help me reach Val Royeaux before Gaspard does. Once I do that, Gaspard will have no chance to oppose me, and I will crush his rebellion and put him to death."

"Leaving you free to break your promises," the warleader said, "like the humans before you."

The Keeper waved him to silence. "You would have me risk the lives of my clan to help smuggle you past your rival's soldiers, and in return, you offer what? A chance to visit your buildings?"

Celene wanted a drink, but reminding them that she was at their mercy would weaken her place in the discussion. "I don't know what you want, Keeper. If you have a proposal, I can certainly—"

"You destroyed the greatest empire this land has ever seen!" The warleader stepped forward, fist drawn back. "And when our people banded with Andraste to gain freedom from Tevinter, you betrayed us *again*!"

She sat unflinching before his anger, then turned to the Keeper. "This discussion is unlikely to change the past," she said. "If you have a request, name it."

"You do not understand," the Keeper said. He gestured again, and the warleader stepped back. "You ask us to speak logically, when our entire history is filled with your people betraying and degrading ours. You took our land, our culture, even our immortality."

"And you do not seem to understand the opportunity that has landed in your lap." Celene glared at the warleader, then at the Keeper. "This is the time to demand reparations. Do you wish conditions improved for the elves in our cities? Free emigration to the Dalish clans?" Seeing their blank faces, she took a gamble. "Honorary lordship of Halamshiral and the surrounding lands?"

She had gambled wrong. She saw that immediately as their shoulders drew back, the tattoos on their faces twisting as they grimaced in revulsion, but she couldn't tell why.

"Honorary lordship." The warleader sneered.

“Your nature *pollutes us*,” the Keeper said slowly. “The poor creatures in the alienages you think of as elves are but poor cousins, lost to us forever. Some clans might accept a few of them to strengthen their numbers, or even out of misguided pity, but they are not our people. Do you understand that, *shemlen* empress? You think to offer a partnership, to let us sit in Halamshiral and deal with *shemlen* merchants and flat-eared peasants who have forgotten everything of ancient Elvhenan, and bow to you on your throne in Val Royeaux.” He shook his head. “If you and Gaspard slew each other, and the war killed every human in Orlais, and burned every alienage to the ground … *then* we would be willing to return to Halamshiral.”

It shook her, though she kept her face calm. “Then why are we talking, Keeper?”

“Because that idiot Felassan brought you here, *shemlen* empress.” The Keeper grimaced. “And now we must decide which of the Way of Three Trees to follow. Do we give you some token aid and hope for some token gesture later? Do we give you to Gaspard and hope for the same? Or do we kill you, burn your body, and hope that you bring Clan Virnehn less trouble in death than you do in life?”

The silence was broken a moment later by shouting from the edge of the camp. The Keeper and the elders looked over, while Celene sat as calmly as she could, trying to think. The pain in her head was dull but steady, and her wits were slower than usual.

She was the Empress of Orlais. She was without her gowns, her jewels, and her armies, but that *should* not have mattered. She had played the Game and won for twenty years … but these elves played by different rules. If she did not learn them quickly, they would clearly finish what Gaspard had started.

She would not allow that.

“What is this?” the warleader shouted. “How did he escape?” Celene looked over then, and saw Ser Michel, bruised and bloodied, being dragged into the camp by a group of scouts.

“He escaped?” Celene had assumed he and Briala had been held somewhere else in the camp, either to interrogate them or minimize the chance of all the prisoners coordinating an escape.

The warleader looked at her with contempt. “Did you think we would let a *shemlen* warrior walk free? Bad enough that we let Felassan’s pet loose. He was tied up beside you until…” He broke off, paused, then shook his head, staring at the spot next to Celene in confusion.

“He was gone when I awoke.” Celene looked at the guards nearby. “Perhaps you might question the men who let a bound prisoner escape without noticing for several hours?”

“I did not escape!” Michel shouted as the scouts dragged him closer, his voice hoarse. They had not been gentle. “I would not leave my empress.”

The warleader strode forward and yanked Michel’s head up by the hair. “Then how?”

“My mind was taken by magic.” Michel met the warleader’s stare evenly. “As were the guards’. They cut me free, and I came to my senses by a stone circle with a demon standing inside.”

Celene watched the Keeper go white, the tattoos on his face suddenly livid against the pallor. Fear, she understood. Whatever the cause—even, Maker forbid, a demon—fear could be played the same way here as in the court at Val Royeaux.

“Has there been some misunderstanding?” she asked with an innocent smile.

“Bind him,” the Keeper snapped. The scouts threw Michel to the ground, and the guards quickly tied his arms and legs. “Mihris! Come! We will see to the wards!” The Keeper left without another word, and the young healer who had treated Celene’s head ran to catch up with him.

That was one gone.

The rest of the Dalish stared at Celene and Michel with varying degrees of disgust and fear. For a moment, Celene wondered if she had miscalculated again, if they would kill her on the spot.

“I demand to know what is going on,” she said. She glanced at Michel, and he gave a tiny nod. “Your treatment has been intolerable, and refusing to explain yourselves—”

“Enough!” The warleader turned to the clan elders. “I will deal with them.”

They nodded and, looking back with anger and fear on their tattooed faces, left Celene and Michel. That left only one, although he had been the one ready to attack her right from the start.

“You have endangered my clan with your foul magic, *shemlen*,” the warleader said to Michel. His fists were clenched, his face flushed with anger, and the marks on his face seemed to pulse as his jaw twitched. “I will see you dead.”

“Let the scouts beat me for a few more hours first,” Michel said through bloodied lips, “and perhaps you will stand a chance.” Celene shot him a warning look, but Michel matched her stare, and after a moment, she understood. The elven warleader would see any sign of submission as weakness, and right now, weakness could see them killed.

“When you fight him, Ser Michel, please allow him an ally,” she said, “in the interest of a fair fight.”

The warleader glared and stalked off, and the guards, looking at Michel and Celene nervously, went some distance away. They stood close enough to keep a close watch on Celene, but far enough that they could talk to each other without being overheard. She saw the quick, furtive motions of the hands, the nervous shifting. They would have been laughed out of Lady Mantillon’s sitting room, so obvious was their fear.

“My apologies for taking the initiative in that conversation,” Michel said quietly.

“Hush, Michel. You were correct, and you well know it.”

“That is no excuse for overruling the opinion of the empress,” Michel said with a smile that caused a scab on his lip to split open.

“They will almost certainly kill us,” Celene murmured. “Whatever you found is worth our lives.”

“That may be, Majesty, but it may also save them.”

Celene started in surprise. “Magic?”

“Indeed.” He lowered his voice even further. “The elves have summoned a demon. They seek to unlock ancient magical mirrors that allow the elves to travel undetected across all of Orlais. Protected by magic, secret for centuries.”

Celene went still. “I could get back safely to Val Royeaux.”

“More than that, you could move scouts or small teams in secret,” Michel added, “to strike Gaspard without warning and crush him without mercy.”

Celene smiled slowly. “Now all we need to do is not let them kill us.”

It seemed the visit to the Dalish had not been a waste after all.

With a gentle patter, the first rainfall of autumn began to pour down.

* * *

Briala parted ways with Felassan in the woods.

Her mentor had mentioned a nearby lake that would give her a chance to get clean. He had also suggested delicately that staying away from the Dalish camp would be safer for the moment. Time, he said, would open a path for them.

She took him at his word, more than willing to leave the Dalish alone.

She found the lake with little trouble. It was small and placid, fed by a river that came down from the Frostbacks to the east. Lily pads covered the surface, and dragonflies danced in the air overhead, seizing one last chance to find a mate.

The dark gray clouds rolling down from the north brought with them a cold wind, but Briala stripped off her armor and underclothes anyway. She rinsed off her underclothes and wrung them out, then laid them down to dry and stepped into the water herself.

It was shockingly cold, but she kept moving, first in to her ankles, then her knees, and then the final step down that plunged her beneath the water.

For a moment, then, the icy ache became numbness, and she felt nothing except the tiny ripples of the waves pulling her to and fro.

She remembered.

Coming up from the water, ten-year-old Briala shook her head.

"Briala, you'll get bathwater everywhere!" her mother scolded, though she laughed as she said it. "Come now, wash your hair. We need you nice and clean so that you can wait on Miss Celene tomorrow."

Briala tugged her hair down into her face. "Celene doesn't want Lady Mantillon to come. She says that Lady Mantillon is scary."

Briala's mother smiled, glancing quickly at the door. "Miss Celene has nothing to worry about. Lady Mantillon loves her very much. Hurry now." She reached in and worked the knots from Briala's hair. "You want to look nice."

"Why?" Briala asked, scrubbing her feet with a soapy brush. "Lady Mantillon never even looks at us."

"She would see if you were dirty," her mother said with certainty, yanking on Briala's hair.

"Can we fix my hair to cover my ears?"

Her mother's hands went still.

"Mother?"

"No, child. You must never cover your ears." Her mother's voice caught, then held.

"Why?" Briala pulled away, then turned around and looked up. "Will I get in trouble for trying to pass?"

"Perhaps." Her mother smiled again, but her cheeks were flushed. "But more than that, you are my daughter, Briala. We serve a prince, and you serve Miss Celene. None of those Dalish elves can say that. You should be proud of who you are."

Under the water, Briala reached down with her toes, poking past weeds and looking for solid ground.

Coming up from the water, twenty-year-old Briala saw the coach driver fall with a dart in his throat. The water slid from her oil-sealed clothes, and she made no noise as she pulled herself onto the low bridge. In the moonless darkness, she was just another shadow.

The horses were restless, and she patted their sides to calm them, then opened the crate she had used to block the bridge and force the coach driver to stop.

She took her bow and quiver from the crate, walked around the side of the coach, and shot an arrow through the door.

A moment later she eased the door open and looked inside.

The arrow had taken Lady Mantillon in the abdomen. The wound barely showed against the older woman's heavy burgundy gown, but her face was deathly pale.

"My apologies for the graceless introduction," Briala said, "but I feared you suspected an attack, and would have something prepared if I just opened the door."

With a tiny smile, Lady Mantillon gestured to a tiny, jeweled stiletto that lay on the floor, barely more than a knitting needle with a coating of oily black liquid along the blade. "You feared correctly, Briala."

Briala started, then recovered. "So you remember me." Her hair, tied back and braided to keep it out of the way even when wet, dripped cold water down her back. "I thought we would all look the same to you."

"I remember Celene's beautiful elven servant girl, who watched everything so carefully." Lady Mantillon's voice was a bare whisper, and Briala leaned in closer to hear her. "I wondered if Celene might have passed on her lessons in the bardic arts."

"She did." Briala smiled and drew her dagger. "All the better to avenge my parents."

"Ah." Lady Mantillon nodded. "And after I am dead, Briala, what will you do?"

Briala leaned in. "I will return to Celene," she said, "and make her the greatest empress Orlais has ever seen. And if anyone tries to use her, to turn

her into someone like you, I will see to it that they die forgotten."

She expected the words to sting, but Lady Mantillon seemed to relax instead. The older woman let out a long breath and settled back, wincing as her breath caught. When she spoke again, her voice was louder. "I regret the deaths of your family, Briala." She caught Briala's gaze and calmly asked, "Was there anything else?"

"No." Briala stabbed just as she had learned, up between the ribs, and Lady Mantillon flinched, nodded once, and went still.

As her body relaxed, a second tiny stiletto fell from her hand and clattered on the floor of the coach. Briala stared at it in disbelief.

Lady Mantillon had almost certainly been close enough to strike. Briala herself had leaned in to hear her last whispered words better. And yet Lady Mantillon had stayed her hand.

Foolish noblewoman.

Briala stepped out of the coach, then cut the horses from their harnesses and slapped their flanks. They ran off into the night, and she turned and walked back across the low bridge.

In the woods, out of sight of the road, she found Felassan lying unmoving by a fire. Blankets were stacked by the cheery blaze, and she wrapped them around herself, taking in the warmth while her mentor lay still, barely breathing. A pot full of stew had been warmed for her as well, though the smoke still smelled of the herbs he had sprinkled into the fire to help him enter the world of dreams.

She had finally warmed up enough to try the soup when Felassan opened his eyes and sat up, his breath quickening as he rose from his magical sleep. "How did it go?"

"My parents are avenged." Briala nodded and dipped a spoon into the stew. The spoon shook in her fingers, and try though she might, she could not get it to hold still. The stew dripped from the spoon, and she thought of a trail of red pooling on the floor of the reading room and shut her eyes. It was done. She was done.

“Good.” He smiled. “Orlesian nobles. Not immortal, like our ancient ancestors, but fairly hard to kill nevertheless. Nicely done.”

“Thank you.” Briala got the spoon to her mouth, took a bite, and realized that she was ravenous. She forced herself to chew and let the warmth spread out through her with each bite.

“Are you sure that you’re ready to go back?” Felassan asked after a time. “You’re absolutely positive that Celene will take you back into her house?”

Briala thought of Celene’s lips crushing hers, and she felt herself flush. “Yes. She’ll take me back.”

“Then you will do much good for the elves in the palace at Val Royeaux,” Felassan said, and glanced over. “Do not doubt that, da’len*.”*

“I still wish I could see the Dalish.” She scraped the spoon against the bottom of the pot, then put both aside.

“I know.” Felassan smiled. “But Val Royeaux is where you are needed. The Dalish will help as they can. You help as you can. Tattoos upon your face do not make you a true elf,” he added, when she was silent. “Be proud of who you are.”

Coming up from the water, Briala took in a great lungful of air.

By the time she finished scrubbing the dirt from her limbs and rinsing the smoke from her hair, her body had gone comfortably numb. She swam, thinking of nothing, then looked up when she felt wetness sprinkle her face. The gray clouds overhead had opened up with thick wet raindrops.

It turned from a sprinkle to a steady downpour even as she swam back to shore, jabbing her feet on the rocks by the shore. The rain had soaked through her underclothes, and she shivered as she put them on. She pulled on her boots, but carried the rest of her armor rather than wear it wet.

She had been in Celene’s court for too long.

Too many years being called “rabbit,” too many years ducking her head and working from the shadows. Too many years of *being proud of who she*

was, a feeling she could cling to like a floating log in a rushing river. It had kept her head above water, but it had never let her steer her own course.

She would fight for her people, because nobody else would, and Fen’Harel take whoever got in her way.

12

Drenched and shivering, Celene watched Briala walk through the downpour through the Dalish camp. Briala was soaked as well, though from her rain-slicked hair, Celene guessed she had gone off to bathe nearby.

The guards had not offered blankets, though they had moved under an overhang themselves. Though most of the Dalish had retreated to their wagons or erected canvas awnings to protect them and their belongings from the rain, Celene and Ser Michel had been left to the elements.

The camp had been quiet since well before the rain started. Michel's return, and the revelation that the camp had been ensnared by the magic of the demon the Keeper had summoned, had cast a pall over the Dalish. The songs and banter had stopped. The combat training had become rote, perfunctory. And in that sad silence, Celene had seen more of the Dalish than she had expected.

There were fewer than fifty of them, she had realized, and unless there were more children and adolescents playing in the woods, the camp would not be growing larger in the coming years. True, it was but one clan of many, but from what Celene understood, the clans met only rarely, for their own safety. There might only be a handful of other clans in all of Orlais.

They were the rebel army Gaspard feared, the secret hope of the elves living in the slums. It seemed to Celene a heavy burden of hope and fear to put on so few shoulders.

The rain had soaked through Celene's clothes. She was curled up next to Michel, both of them trying to keep warm as best they could. It was getting darker, though the misty haze made it hard to be certain what time it was.

Briala walked into the camp as though she felt nothing, striding with a noble's confident grace. She did not even look at the guards until they stepped up and challenged her. She waved away their inquiries with a casual arrogance that made Celene smile, then came to where she lay. The guards seemed unsure if she was a visitor or a fellow prisoner. They shifted awkwardly and moved back under the overhang where they could keep watch and stay dry.

"They have not given you shelter?" Briala asked, confused.

"They have other concerns," Ser Michel said, the words muffled by his split lip and swollen cheek, and Briala flinched when she saw what had happened to his face.

Celene lowered her voice and quickly shared what Michel had discovered about the eluvians. She had trained Briala well. By the time Celene had finished, Briala was nodding, her big beautiful eyes narrowed in thought.

"Fast travel across Orlais. An ambush anywhere you desire. Supply lines that can't even be found, much less disrupted. The demon said it was locked?" She kept her voice low and turned to face Celene, her back to the guards, in case they tried to read the words on her lips.

"I'm not certain," said Michel. "He only said that they needed to be awakened."

"Whatever the specifics," Celene said, "something prevents the Dalish from using it."

"The demon can unseal the eluvians," Michel said, "but the Dalish can't give him what he wants. What *it* wants, rather." His words were hard, and Celene saw the fear that hid beneath them. Her champion would fear no mortal man in battle, but a monster from beyond the Veil was different.

It would prick his pride to show that she saw his fear, so she let it pass.

“Can we give it what it wants?” Briala asked. Michel nodded without speaking, and Briala frowned in thought. The rain slid down her face like tears. “This could give us leverage with the Dalish. Working together, we could—”

“Bria.” Celene kept her voice soft, kept her usual ring of authority out of the words. “The Dalish will never work with us. I learned that plainly today. Right now, they are trying to decide whether to turn us over to Gaspard or kill us outright.”

“But they would not…” Briala trailed off, whatever spirited defense of the Dalish she had started dying on her lips. She had spent time with them, Celene guessed, and learned her own unhappy lessons about how much the Dalish cared for her people.

“I spent the afternoon speaking with their Keeper,” Celene said. “I offered to help the elves in the alienages. He said that he would rather we all simply die.”

For a moment, Briala looked as though she would object. Then she stopped, and her head dipped in acknowledgment.

“Michel,” Celene said, “give us a moment.” With a nod, he scooted over to the far edge of the wagon, as far as his bonds would let him move. Celene immediately felt the cold curl around her from where he had sat, and she shivered despite herself.

Briala moved in close and wrapped her arms around Celene.

“Celene,” she whispered.

Rain had plastered her dark hair to her face, and her tunic and leggings were soaked and gray. Her ears stuck out to either side, rain dripping from their tips.

She was the most beautiful creature Celene had ever seen.

“I know you, Bria. All the time we have been together, you have pressed for your people. You turned your back on me because of what I did in Halamshiral, and Maker, I cannot fault you, for I took no pride in sacrificing your people to counter Gaspard.” Still shivering as the cold rain

whipped around them, Celene looked out at the wagons. “But these are *not* your people.”

Briala’s arms tightened around her. “I know.”

“They do not care for the elves in the alienages as you do. As they should.”

Celene felt Briala shiver around her. “I know. And if Michel can get the demon to awaken the eluvians, then they may agree to help us regardless. The demon won’t help them. They *need* us.”

“Do we need them?”

Celene felt Briala go still, then pull away from her. She looked into the deepness of Briala’s eyes without flinching.

“You would have us betray them?” she asked. Celene could read nothing in her voice.

“Betrayal implies a broken trust. They took us prisoner, threatened us with death, and left us here in the rain.” Celene allowed her voice to shake from the cold and saw Briala flinch at the words. “Tell me that they have welcomed you with open arms as a long-lost sister, and I will say no more.”

Briala shut her eyes.

“Tell me that, and I will take joy in my love finding her people, even as my breast aches with every heartbeat I live without you.”

“As does mine,” Briala whispered.

“Then stay with me.” Celene reached out with her bound hands and touched the fine line of Briala’s jaw, and Briala’s eyes flickered open. “Help me return to Val Royeaux, and I will strike every law that limits your people’s freedom and make you a lady.” Celene smiled. “The Comtess of the Elves.”

Briala took a breath. “You cannot do that. The lords—”

“The lords have bickered and dithered and played games with their loyalties, and I am done with those who think I must earn their loyalty while they offer me nothing. Your people deserve better.” Celene met Briala’s stare. “They have no voice in the Dales to fight for them, as our lords and ladies fear. They are not the elves of Arlathan. They are Orlesian.

They are mine.” She caught Briala’s shoulder and pulled her gently in. “As you are mine.”

Their kiss was slow but savage, rough to awaken feeling in lips that had gone blue with chill. Celene felt the heat bloom between them as Briala’s hands slid up Celene’s waist and cupped her face, now warm despite the rain streaming down her cheeks.

When she broke free, Briala was flushed as well. “I will find Felassan,” she said. “When we create the distraction, you can escape and get to the demon.”

“Can Felassan be trusted?”

“I think so,” Briala said. “I can win him over.”

Then she stood and turned to the guards. “I must speak to Felassan. Get them a blanket, you fools, unless you wish them to die before the Keeper is finished with them!”

She stalked off carrying a confidence Celene knew she had learned from Val Royeaux, and Celene hid a smile.

When she was gone, she turned to Michel. “Did you hear?”

“I believed you wanted privacy,” Michel said, in what was not quite an answer, looking over at her in question.

“How are you feeling?”

He forced a smile. “I am prepared to fight whenever you need me, Majesty.”

“Fight and win?”

He rolled out his shoulders slowly, wincing a little. “It would be easier had you not ordered me to let their warleader fight me with an ally,” he said gravely, “but I will make do.”

Just as with the demon, her champion needed his pride. She smiled and let him have it. “I could release you from that order, my champion.”

“No, no. The elves would talk. We have a reputation to uphold.” Michel grinned, then glanced over at the guards and lowered his voice. “When do we move?”

Celene looked off into the rain. “Most likely when people start dying.”

* * *

Briala left the camp before the guards decided to arrest her, her hands shaking and her heart pounding like a racing rabbit's.

She tried not to think of elves walking free and happy in the marketplace, of chevaliers ending their punitive beatings every time the elves complained, of the Chantry inducting elven women into its priesthood. Felassan had told her while hunting that tasting the meal spoiled the shot. She put it from her mind and focused on the task at hand.

Outside the camp, she retrieved her drakeskin armor and put it back on, ignoring the water squishing through soaked underclothes and the bite of the armor where cold and rain spoiled the perfect fit. Then, ready for whatever came, she hunted.

Briala found Felassan coming back toward the camp from the woods. He was using some subtle magic, and he was barely damp despite the rain that now, in the twilight, poured down in an almost solid wall of water.

For a moment, she was uncertain. But she had thought of everything he had said even before she spoke with Celene, and her memory had never failed her before. If she were wrong, she had no arrow in her quiver, and at that moment she needed an arrow desperately. For herself, and for her empress.

Tasting the meal spoiled the shot. She held up a hand, and as Felassan saw her and nodded, she said, "Michel was spirited away from the camp by a demon that Thelhen summoned. All of Clan Virnehn is terrified."

Felassan laughed. "Clan Virnehn has an admirably optimistic view of its Keeper's warding magic."

"What they are doing is wrong."

"It's hardly *wrong*." Felassan shrugged. "Unlike mages in the Circle, the Dalish do not think of demons as evil, but as wild animals, dangerous if treated carelessly." Felassan shrugged. "Now, if you had said that what they were doing was *stupid…*"

"They are going to kill Celene and Michel."

Felassan leaned down and plucked a small plant whose wet leaves hung limp in the rain. “There’s a small flower that grows in this part of the forest. If left to bloom and die on its own, it stays small and inconsequential, but if it is uprooted, a whole host of flowers will sprout from the area where it was torn.” He rubbed the leaves between his fingers. “I have always loved the idea of life that could only grow from violence.”

Briala raised an eyebrow. “Is that the flower?”

“No, this is…” Felassan looked closer. “… itchweed, actually.” He dropped the plant and rubbed his hands on his leggings. “No fascinating metaphors there.”

Briala wasn’t sure if the Dalish were the special flower and Celene and Michel were the itchweed, or the other way around. The rain dappled little pats of cold across her arms, dripping through her hair, and she decided that she didn’t care. She was tired of being the good city elf who patiently struggled to learn the wisdom of her elders.

She had seen her elders. They summoned demons and left her people to die.

“I’m going to rescue Celene and Michel from the Dalish,” she said, and Felassan choked out a laugh. “I’d like your help.”

“I imagine you would, *da’len*. Have you noticed my lovely *vallaslin*?” He pointed at his face, which was still almost entirely dry despite the rain.

“You once told me that tattoos upon my face didn’t make me a true elf.”

He coughed. “I was being polite.”

“Oh, stop.” She snorted. “It’s getting dark, and I don’t have magic that keeps me dry in the rain. We both know you’re going to help me.”

Felassan was often whimsical, sometimes philosophical, but very rarely frightening to Briala.

But in the silence after her words had fallen, Briala felt a strange heaviness in the air, and though Felassan smiled politely, it did not twist the tattoos around his eyes like a real smile would have, and his hands had gone still, one of them tucked under his cloak where he kept his staff. He still

leaned against the tree, but one leg had shifted, the motion barely noticeable, to give him leverage to kick himself off the tree.

Only someone who had spent her life training to observe people, someone who knew Felassan's moods and body language from years of training, would know that he was ready to kill if need be.

"And how, *da'len*, do we know that?" he asked, his voice still light and friendly.

"Because this isn't your clan," she said, "and you've let slip in a dozen different ways that you don't care about them, that you're nothing like them."

He kicked off the tree, slow and casual and still smiling, and cocked his head, looking at her with interest as he began to walk in a slow circle around her. "Continue."

Briala did not turn to face Felassan. Her back itched between her shoulder blades, but she did not show her fear. He had taught her better than that. Instead, she held up a hand and raised one finger. "First, you go into a trance to enter the world of dreams. I thought all Dalish did that, but I saw elves sleeping back at the camp."

"Only *somniari* go into the trance," Felassan said from behind her, "and only mages are *somniari*. And not all Dalish are mages."

"True." For a moment, Briala thought that it had stopped raining. Then she realized that it had simply stopped raining around *her*. Felassan was close enough that whatever magic hung around him cloaked her as well. "Second, when you pass by the statues that honor the elven gods, you do not look at them. Most of the clan members bow or nod, but *all* of them look as they pass by … all except you."

"You have not convinced me, *da'len*." His breath whispered in her ear.

"I don't need to convince you. If I take my suspicions to Clan Virnehn, will they turn on you? How do Dalish elves deal with spies?"

"In my experience," he said, "they spend several years debating—"

"Third." She lifted another finger. "You just called the Dalish *they* instead of *we*, as you so often do."

For a moment, there was no sound around her, no rain, no trees rustling in the wind, not even the sound of her own heartbeat.

Then Felassan shook his head and laughed. “Damn it, I did, didn’t I?” he said as he came around to face her.

The rain spattered down on Briala, shockingly cold but welcome all the same.

“Don’t blame me, *hahren*,” she said, smiling. “You made me this way. You have no one to blame but yourself when you burn your fingers in the fire you kindled.”

“I kindled nothing,” Felassan said, waving away her words. “I saw a fire that burned brightly already … and would burn itself out if left unchecked. I merely offered guidance.”

She had him now, she could tell, but she had to press. “Your clan knows so much more than this one?”

Felassan sighed. “Sad, isn’t it?”

“Sad, and more than a little implausible.” She cocked her head, deliberately mimicking Felassan’s own body language. “Are you even Dalish?”

Felassan stepped forward again, until his face was inches from hers, and all she could see were his eyes and the tattoos around them. “Do you want to know the answer to that question, *da’len*, or do you want my help?”

It was still raining on her, and Briala thought that meant she was in no real danger, that Felassan was not preparing his magic to strike her dead if she answered wrong. But it struck her, staring into those eyes, that if anyone could be so controlled, so tightly coiled, as to keep his magical tells in check on those occasions when he was truly ready to kill, it would be her mentor.

As if hearing her thoughts, he quietly said, “That wasn’t a rhetorical question.”

She swallowed. “I want your help, *hahren*.”

“Good.” And with that, he pulled her into a hug. “And because I know you were wondering, *you* were the flower. Now…” He stepped back, and

his grin now was predatory but familiar and safe, at least for Briala. “… let us go kill some itchweed.”

* * *

The sun had set not long ago, but the rain continued, leaving the Dalish camp in wet shadows. The Dalish themselves had mostly retreated to their wagons, and the elves with business outside tended to it reluctantly, cursing the wetness as they patrolled the perimeter or fetched food from another wagon.

Ser Michel watched it all, noting the guards, the lights in the wagons, everything.

The guards had given Michel and Celene blankets. The thin cloth had soaked through in minutes, wrapping Michel in a band of cold. Celene had tried to arrange hers as a makeshift tarp to keep the rain off her. Michel wore his. The guards had been surprised and angry when they’d bound him, and it had made them sloppy. Under the blanket, he worked steadily on the knots and waited for the distraction.

He did not make a plan, because he had only the vaguest idea what Briala and Felassan would do, and a plan devised on such sketchy information would only muddle his actions. A chevalier knew when to anticipate and when to simply react, to trust instincts honed from years of training.

Both the canvas bag with his armor and the stolen leather armor Celene had worn sat by the warleader’s wagon, under a canvas awning that protected them from the rain. His weapons were there as well.

There were three guards in view, and all of them would reach Michel before he reached his sword. He twisted his arm and pulled, rain-slicked skin sliding painfully through the bonds, and then he was free and ready for whatever Felassan did.

The rain seemed to stutter for a moment, halting as though unsure of itself. That was the only warning the camp had before great bolts of lightning seared down from the rainstorm and shattered the silence. One

bolt split a tree at the edge of camp. Michel couldn't even hear the crack of shattered wood as booming thunder shook the wagons and rattled his teeth.

"Michel?" Celene asked as the Dalish shouted and ran. Across the camp, Michel saw the Keeper leap out of his wagon and rush toward the woods, his staff an ember of red in the darkness.

Another bolt roared down from the sky, and one of the great wagons caught flame. Someone inside screamed.

"One moment, Majesty." Three guards, and Michel had no armor and no weapon save a blanket.

He stood, keeping the blanket over the front of his body, and walked toward them.

The guards were looking at the burning wagon and didn't see him coming until he was almost there. Then the first guard glanced over, saw him, and turned to raise a cry.

Michel flung the sopping blanket into his face, kicked him in the knee, snapped the blanket around the back of his head, and smashed his knee into the guard's trapped face.

Two left, and though he'd moved fast, the Dalish were well trained, and they were already turning and drawing their swords.

Michel let the first guard drop and held the blanket across his body like a shield.

The chevaliers *preferred* to fight in armor. Owning a set of armor was a sign of wealth and nobility, and contrary to the bards' jokes, a trained warrior could still move quickly and gracefully in heavy armor, provided the armor fit.

However, any group that wished to maintain its reputation for producing the greatest warriors in Thedas had to be ready to face fighters who preferred other styles.

Such as, for example, the duelists of Antiva and Rivain, who fought with light blades and often wore no armor save their capes.

The guard on the right stabbed at him. Michel twisted the blanket, trapped the blade, slammed an elbow into the guard's face, *took* the blade,

and sliced the guard's throat open as he stepped away.

The guard on the left blanched, then yelled and came in hard with a high slash. Michel ducked, spun the blanket so that it flared out before the guard's face, then thrust *through* it, punching through the guard's ironbark armor and pinning him to a wagon.

Michel drew the blade back out, through flesh, armor, and blanket, then tossed the blanket aside. He grabbed the dead guard's blade for his left hand, walked back to Celene, and cut her bonds.

"Empress, if you get to the trail, I will be along in a moment." He gestured to the warleader's wagon. "I just need to recover our gear."

"Go with the Maker, Ser Michel," Celene said as she stood.

Michel nodded and walked through the pouring rain and crashing lightning across the Dalish camp, past the soaked and smoking cookfires and toward the war wagon where his gear waited. His wrists burned from tearing free from the ropes, and his lip and ribs still bore the bruises of the Dalish beatings, but he was more than ready.

He had been polite. He had limited his insults, as Felassan had asked. In return, the Dalish had attacked him, insulted him, and subjected him to foul demon magic.

Ser Michel de Chevin was ready to show the Dalish what an Orlesian chevalier could do.

A warrior stepped from the wagon as he neared it, a silhouette against candlelight inside, and Michel stabbed without hesitation and ran the elf through. As he fell, another warrior cried out from inside, and Michel parried a pair of fast thrusts as the second warrior lunged from the wagon.

It was the warrior who had trained the children. Though he was little more than a dark shape in the pouring rain, Michel could tell by the elf's movements. He attacked well, with hard fast strikes that Michel could barely see in the twilight.

Then the elven warrior slashed, and Michel sidestepped. The warrior moved to match, and his foot slid on the muddy ground, just as Michel had seen earlier in the day.

With a quick leap, Michel slammed into the warrior and locked blades. The warrior stumbled, off balance, and his foot slipped. With his left blade, Michel chopped down and cleaved through muscle and bone. With a quick, short jerk, Michel smashed the hilt of his right blade into the warrior's face, stifling the elf's scream, then stepped back and finished him mercifully with a clean slash that laid open his throat.

Michel waited, but no more warriors came from the wagon, and the elves around the camp were moving frantically to put out the blaze. No one else had yet noticed him.

He made sure that his weapons and shield were ready, in case he was interrupted. Then he donned his armor quickly and efficiently, ignoring the discomfort of his wet underclothes. When he was finished, he grabbed Celene's armor and weapons as well and stalked across the Dalish camp.

Michel had passed the last wagon and was almost to the trail when a bolt of blue light flashed toward him from the left. He barely saw it coming and dove to the side, but it crackled across his ribs, a numbing chill that stung even through his armor. He dropped Celene's gear and turned back to where the blast had been fired.

The Keeper's apprentice, the elven girl who had helped Celene, stood with her glowing staff leveled at him, and the raindrops that fell around her crackled as they turned into hail. In the stuttering white glow of her staff, her face was twisted with fear and rage.

With a yell, Michel raised his sword and shield and ran at her. She flinched, looked down at her staff and then back at him, and flung another blast of crackling cold energy. This time Michel took it on the shield, and the metal screeched, protesting the unnatural chill.

Michel was almost to her when a shout came from the trail to his right, and he turned just in time to parry a fierce blow. He checked the blade with his shield, but he had no time to counter as an armored figure slammed into him and knocked him back.

"Good," the elven warleader said as Michel stumbled and then caught his balance. "You have your armor. I want to see the *shemlen* chevalier at

his finest.” He lunged in again, and Michel took the blow on the shield and staggered back as the warleader kicked at his knee.

“For the insult you have done my empress,” Michel said, “your life is forfeit.” He lashed out, and the warleader caught the blow on his own shield. Michel saw the kick coming this time and slammed his shield down hard, driving the edge into the warleader’s armored leg.

The warleader stabbed high, taking advantage of Michel’s lowered shield, and Michel had to parry, then flailed as the warleader’s shield slammed into his side. “And what of the insult to you, *shemlen*?”

Michel started to answer, but the healer flung another blast of frigid air that slipped past his shield, and the cold drove like a spike into his side, stealing his breath. He stumbled back, gasping.

“Mihris, save your strength,” the warleader called over. “I have him.”

He moved in, knocked aside Michel’s shield, and thrust hard. The strike slid along Michel’s armor, then caught and slid through just below his ribs.

And for a tiny moment, just as Michel had guessed, the warleader paused to admire his strike.

“You don’t.” Michel’s blade slashed up and across the inside of the warleader’s sword arm. With a gasp of pain, the warleader lost his grip on his blade, and Michel smashed his shield into the other man’s face, yanked his shield to the side, and came down with a brutal slash that chopped through the armor and crushed the warleader’s collarbone. The man crumpled to the ground, twitching. “You did me no insult when you called me *shemlen*, knife-ear.” Michel’s final thrust speared through the warleader’s ironbark armor and neatly pinned his heart. “And I fought you with one of your allies, just as my empress asked.”

Michel kept moving as the warleader rattled and died, ignoring the hot pain just below his ribs. He had learned the different types of pain in his training. This one might kill him a few days from now, but he would not let it slow him down tonight.

Spinning, he slammed his shield against the healer’s staff, and the shot she’d been aiming flared off into the trees, leaving a trail of falling hail in

its wake. Michel's sword came down and knocked the staff from her hands.

"Please," the girl said, stumbling back. "Please, don't."

"You would have killed me." Michel raised his blade.

She shut her eyes. "You killed the man I love, back in the camp."

"One of the guards?" Michel wondered if it had been the youngest one, the one whose blade he'd taken after he opened the man's throat. "He would have killed me as well. And you are an apostate. A mage outside the Circle."

The girl opened her eyes. Rain streaked her face. Michel could not tell if she was crying. "I am defenseless, *shemlen.* Where is your chevalier honor?"

"Here," Michel said, and brought his sword down.

He checked his side. The armor could be repaired, though a strong thrust would catch on the armor until then. The wound hurt. His instructors would have told him to remove his armor and tend it, but they would also have told him that duty came first. His empress needed him.

Michel compromised by doing a few movements of *Testing the Blade*, a series of stretches that a smart fighter could use to find torn muscles or strained ligaments that his own pain tolerance had already dismissed as inconsequential. After a few moves, he decided that his side would wait. The wound would bleed, but the elven warleader had found no vital organs with what turned out to have been his dying blow.

He found his empress on the trail to the demon's circle. Celene stepped out from the trees, and only her pale skin stopped Michel from raising his blade against another attack. "Empress," he said with relief. "Your weapons and armor."

"Thank you, Michel." Celene held her arms out, and Michel quickly strapped her armor on and fastened the buckles.

He had almost finished when Briala and Felassan stepped from the trees. Felassan leaned heavily on his staff, and Briala had her bow out. "Any trouble?" she asked.

“Nothing unexpected.” Michel finished buckling Celene into her armor and stood. “And you?”

“We evaded a few of their scouts,” Briala said, “and Felassan made life difficult for their Keeper.”

“Then let us hurry,” Celene said.

Michel led the way down the hillside. Even in the dark, barely able to make out the trail in the rain and darkness, his feet seemed to naturally know the way.

In the little bowl at the base of the hill, the stones glowed with magic, their light bright enough to force Michel to squint. And inside the circle of stones, where the demon stood in his black coat, perfectly illuminated, not a drop of rain fell.

“Ser Michel,” he said, grinning as Michel came down into the hollow. “And you’ve brought friends. Are any of them for our…” He hesitated, then looked at Michel and said delicately, “… arrangement?”

“Imshael,” Felassan said. He sounded impressed.

“Hello, Slow Arrow.” The demon smiled. “It’s been some time. How’ve you been?”

“Oh, you know.”

“I want you to awaken the eluvians,” Michel said.

Imshael blinked. “That wasn’t what I—”

“Awaken the eluvians,” Michel said, and raised his sword, “or I smash the runes on these stones. Earlier today, you let slip that that would hurt you.”

“Well, there’s hurt, and then…” Imshael trailed off. “Why would *you* want the eluvians?”

“I suggest you do as he says, demon,” Celene said behind Michel.

“Spirit!” Imshael said in exasperation. “How many times do I have to—fine, fine! You want the eluvians.” He looked at Michel searchingly. “Ah, for your empress, so she can sneak assassins all over the empire and hamstring Gaspard with no one the wiser. And you will give me what I want?”

Without hesitation, Michel held up his hand, still red with blood from the wound he'd taken fighting the warleader. "I will do what I must."

Imshael squinted, then smiled. "Good enough. Then we have a deal." He pressed his hands together, and coils of red light shone from between his fingers. When he brought his hands apart, he held a ruby the size of a child's fist. "The keystone," he said. "It will awaken the mirror nearest you. Once you step through, stay on the path, and you will find your way to the crossroads. From there, let the keystone guide you. It will point you toward a chamber where you will find a pedestal that lacks just such a gem. Place the gem, whisper anything you like, and all the eluvians will awaken, ready to use." He smiled. "But only to those who whisper the same phrase. Old magic. Lets honored guards in, keeps tomb robbers out."

"That's it?" Celene asked.

Imshael smiled. "That's it. Oh, you may encounter a bit of trouble on the way to the central chamber, but I'm certain it's nothing the Empress of Orlais can't handle." He spun the ruby through his fingers, then placed it on the ground, stepped away, and gestured to it invitingly. "Now, then, this is yours … just as soon as I have what I want."

"Done," Michel said.

With a grunt, he smashed the pommel of his sword against the glowing rune on the nearest stone.

"Hey!" Imshael shouted. "We had a bargain! You made a choice!" He lunged for the ruby.

Michel brought his pommel down again with all the force he could bring to bear, and the rune snapped and sizzled, then went dark. All around the circle, the stones shattered like blown glass.

The demon let out an unearthly cry and fell to his knees, clutching at his chest. The air around him crackled with red light, and he warped and twisted upon himself, as though he were but a reflection in a pond, and someone had dropped a stone into the water.

"Are you *quite* finished?" Felassan asked, rolling his eyes.

And with a tiny roll of thunder, the light faded, and Imshael stood up.

The grass where he had knelt showed footprints.

“Thank you, yes, I believe so,” Imshael said, and strode out of the circle.

Michel felt the slow prickling dread creep across his neck and tighten his jaw. “You were supposed to die.”

Imshael looked down at himself, then back at Michel. “Then this must be *very* disappointing for you.”

“Actually, the *elgar’arla*, the spirit-trap, was what bound him,” Felassan said. “For reference, that would be the rock you just destroyed.”

Michel turned to Felassan, his hands shaking. “You knew?”

“And you allowed him to go free?” Briala asked.

“Well, think about the alternative,” Imshael said as he walked up to them. The air around Michel seemed to turn to steel, and he dropped to his knees, gasping. Briala and Celene had fallen as well. Only Felassan seemed unaffected. “If you actually *accepted* my bargain, then I would have possessed you. Celene would have lost her champion, and your merry little band might not have survived the eluvians. As it stands, everyone gets what they want.”

Michel fought his way back to his feet. “But you said…”

Imshael raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I *said* that you should forget about the eluvians, and you fixated on them. I *said* that you should accept my bargain and avoid harming the stones, and you came back and destroyed them.” He smiled and stepped closer. “You did *precisely* the opposite of whatever I asked, Ser Michel de Chevin. And now, by the entirely predictable *choices* you have made, you’ve freed a … spirit … upon your empire.”

Michel raised his sword, and Imshael shot him a look. The air around Michel tightened again, and his sword slipped from nerveless fingers.

“The nearest eluvian?” Felassan asked.

“A few hundred yards that way, in the middle of three square-looking boulders.” Imshael pointed. “Can’t miss it. Don’t forget the keystone.”

“Appreciate it.” Felassan nodded. “Have fun.”

“I usually do.” Imshael straightened his coat and began walking up the trail toward the Dalish camp.

For a moment, all four people in the clearing were silent. Then the air filled Michel's lungs again, and he took a few shuddering breaths and climbed back to his feet.

The demon had talked politely, bantered, told jokes, but it was still a demon. And Michel had unleashed it upon the world. He coughed, trying to clear the memory of that suffocating vise wrapped around his lungs.

"Is there anything to be done about him?" Celene asked, still on her knees.

"Certainly." Felassan gestured in the direction Imshael had gone. "Go get him. See how that works out for you." At Celene's glare, he sighed. "For now, he only cares about the Dalish. If we harassed him, he would see which of us made the most noise when our skin was ripped off."

"Then we deserve it." Michel looked down, knuckles aching from their grip on his sword's hilt. "We must slay him, or send him back to the Fade, or—"

"Or regain Orlais," Briala finished.

Celene got unsteadily to her feet and staggered to the stone circle. She picked up the ruby, coughing, and straightened as though holding it gave her strength. When Michel met her gaze, it was as though her face were carved from marble.

"We regain Orlais," she said. "Come on. Let the Dalish deal with the demon they summoned."

They left the clearing and re-entered the darkness and the rain.

13

Celene stared at the three square boulders, dim shapes glinting green and wet in the rain by the light of Felassan's staff.

In the center of the circle the boulders formed, the ground had opened.

She was freezing, soaked, still hurting from when she'd struck her head in their flight from the sylvans. But as she squinted into the hole, she felt herself smiling.

"To pass through the eluvians." Felassan shook his head. In the green light of his staff, he suddenly seemed very young. "Or the few of them that are left, I suppose."

"Is it safe?" Briala asked. She stood next to Celene, and as she spoke, her hand crept into Celene's. Even through her soft leather gloves, Celene could feel the warmth.

"Not at all," Felassan said with a smile.

"Explain," Celene said after a moment when Briala's mentor went silent.

"The eluvians were sealed centuries ago," Felassan said, and eased the head of his staff toward the hole. As the green light lit up the sides, Celene saw that after perhaps a foot of dirt, the walls were stone, smooth as her palace in Val Royeaux and inlaid with runes that sparkled as they caught the light. "They connect all of Orlais, and beyond. They were originally built in many different places, but I suspect that few elven halls of governance or trading markets have survived. The eluvians that still function are likely

those that reside in the tombs of the great leaders of the elven empire. The rulers, the warriors … the mages."

"Traps, then," Michel said. Celene's champion still had his sword out, and he looked around for enemies as he spoke. His face could have been carved from the same stone as the walls of the passage. "To deter thieves."

Felassan nodded, and Celene turned to Briala. "Can you see what you can find?"

Briala smiled wryly. "I don't know that the ancient elves used the same traps we do," she said, but she let go of Celene's hand and crept to the hole. "Felassan?"

"Of course, *da'len*." He closed his eyes and tensed, and a moment later, light flared from his staff, turning night to day in the clearing around them.

Celene blinked, her eyes watering with the sting of sudden brightness. As they adjusted, slowly, she had to suppress a grimace. Briala, kneeling in the dirt by the hole, was filthy and haggard. Ser Michel, her champion, had dents and scrapes on his armor and shield, and his face was pale and streaked with blood. Even Felassan looked exhausted behind the tattoos on his face, though he somehow remained untouched by the rain. She could only imagine how she herself looked—unwashed, injured, and wearing armor stolen from two dead men.

"Pressure plate," Briala said quietly as she lowered herself into the hole feet first. She slid out of sight, and Celene felt her heart pound for a moment. Then Briala's head poked back up, tired but smiling. "Got it. I suppose they *did* make them much like we do."

"That should be the only one," Felassan said, "though we will want to check periodically." He let out a breath, and the light from his staff dimmed down to its normal radiance. Without waiting, he stepped down into the hole, taking Briala's hand as he dropped down.

Michel nodded to Celene, and she followed Felassan, blinking now at the sudden darkness that had afterimages playing across the rainy darkness before her.

It was a staircase, Celene saw as her eyes adjusted, with the first step about four feet down. She lowered herself in, wincing at a sudden wash of dizziness, and felt Briala's hand on her shoulder, steadying her as she stepped down.

"Thank you," Celene said, smiling, and Briala gave her a tiny smile in return.

She followed Briala and Felassan down the stairs, with Michel behind her, his armor rattling with every precise step. In moments, the night sky was gone, replaced by stone.

The staircase widened as they went down, until all four of them could comfortably walk abreast. The steps themselves were slightly longer than was normal. It took just a bit longer than a normal stride to cover a single stair, but not enough for two, and Celene found herself settling into an odd rhythm, taking two short steps and then a long. It made her think of the dances written in three-beat form, and she had to stop herself from humming.

"These steps are oddly sized," Briala said ahead of her.

"Perhaps we were once taller," Felassan said with a chuckle. Celene wasn't sure whether or not he was serious.

"Now that we have time," Celene said to Felassan as they walked, "tell us how this will work."

"Miraculously," Felassan said without pause.

Celene shot him a look. "We walk through one of these magical mirrors as though it is a doorway, and we are transported by magic to Val Royeaux?"

"Ah. No." Felassan chewed on his lip, absently trailing his hand along the runes on the wall. "The eluvians—the mirrors—will take us into another land. In ancient times, paths led the elves through that other land, from eluvian to eluvian. Hopefully the paths remain."

"Hopefully?" Michel asked, glaring.

"It's been a while."

“So everywhere an eluvian is placed,” Briala said slowly, “is like a city district. The other land with the paths is the street, and we want to find the city’s central square, from which we can go anywhere we wish.”

“Something like that.” Felassan smiled. “Only less urban. We must first find the central chamber the demon mentioned. That will let us awaken any eluvian we wish, without the demon’s ruby. Then, hopefully, we locate an eluvian somewhere near the seat of your empire, and you walk out and reclaim your throne.”

Celene nodded. She did not understand it, or at least not as much of it as she would have liked, but Felassan seemed to have a plan.

She guessed it was close to an hour before the stairs ended in a chamber the size of a small dining hall. As they reached the bottom, Felassan paused and gestured to Briala, and she stepped forward and searched at the base of the steps.

“What is this place?” Celene asked, looking down into the chamber. Stone shelves lined the wall, with a few small flasks here and there, and what looked like perfume bottles. Great metal tubs, lined with the same runes as the wall, were set into the ground, near stone pallets that were each large enough to be an altar.

The room ended abruptly in an irregularly shaped wall that Celene realized after a moment was rubble. Bottles and tubs had been knocked over, and the stone pallets on that side of the room were half covered and cracked.

“Cave-in?” Michel asked.

“I doubt they designed it that way, chevalier,” Felassan said. “Fortunately, time has not erased what we seek.” He gestured with his staff, and light flared, bright enough to illuminate the far side of the room.

At first Celene thought she was looking at a doorway, so ornately was it decorated. Great stone statues of warriors with pointed elven ears stood, carved in armor that would have befitted chevaliers. They flanked a great plane of blue-gray glass that arched to a point at the top. Around the

entirety of the mirror, stone carvings twisted and twined in a pattern that made Celene's eyes hurt as she tried to follow the lines.

"This must have been a burial chamber," Felassan said, breaking the silence. "They'd bring the dead here with all the pageantry you'd expect. Beds with sheets of satin, plush pillows, all of it. Then the dead would be cleaned up, and mages would burn away the internal tissue." He stared off into the distance, smiling. "Those who had entered *uthenara*, the eternal sleep, would be cleansed and tended by servants so that no hidden pain might pull them back into this world, then bathed in scented oils to give them the spark of wisdom in their journey."

Briala stood. "Another pressure plate. Very old, very sensitive, but I believe it is safe now."

"Good." Felassan stepped down into the chamber. "I suggest that before we walk through the ancient magical mirror into another world, we get some sleep. I doubt we'll be disturbed here."

Celene and Briala followed, with Michel coming into the chamber last. Celene saw Felassan move from shelf to shelf, reaching out but never touching the flasks. Briala was examining one of the bathing tubs, and Celene came over to her and gently touched her shoulders.

It was more of a gesture than a real touch, given Briala's armor, but for just a moment, Celene could imagine that she was back in her chambers in Val Royeaux, and Briala had crept in through the secret passage, a pale and beautiful spirit in the moonlight.

"When we are back home," Celene murmured into her ear, "we will take a long hot bath together."

Briala stifled a laugh and leaned back against Celene. "I have greatly missed the chance to … be clean." She smelled of sweat and leather, and Celene wanted her all the same. "Though Felassan did say these were ceremonial baths. It would be in terribly poor taste."

Celene looked down at the bathing tub, and something in it felt wrong. Whether it was the runes etched into the metal or the hard angles and

corners, something in the shape of it said that this was not meant for her. “Yes,” she agreed. “Best to avoid them.”

“It is a shame, however,” Briala said softly. “They are beautiful. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like them.” She turned around, close enough that their noses brushed as she whispered, “And someday, majesty, when the elves are free, we may have this again.”

Celene shut her eyes, pushing the wrongness of the bath and the room away. “Someday,” Celene said, and pulled her in for a kiss.

* * *

“What do you mean,” Gaspard said with a patience he did not feel, “the trees are attacking?”

He had pushed his scouts hard, following the trail south past a small peasant village toward the Dales. He had offered lavish praise and good meals every night, barked orders and snarled at delays every day. It was how he dealt with dogs, horses, and men, and it always got results.

They had tracked Celene and gained on her, as far as the scouts could tell. With last night’s downpour, Gaspard had known the trail would be harder to follow.

Now, in the gray morning light, one of the scouts stood before him, obviously terrified, with scratches on his face and arms, telling him that things were even worse than he’d imagined.

“They came to life, my lord,” the scout said. To his credit, his voice was steady. “Some sort of magic. We were following the trail, and we saw signs of battle with some kind of beast. Then the trees moved. They killed the men before me.”

Gaspard grunted, then turned in the saddle to face the rest of his horsemen. “Get Lienne up here!”

Remache rode up instead, his stallion whickering a greeting as it stopped beside Gaspard’s horse. “Is there a problem?”

Gaspard looked down at his scout and saw a little trickle of blood flowing down the side of the man’s face. “Get someone to stitch you up,”

he ordered, and the scout bowed and ran off. Gaspard turned to Remache. “Says the trees attacked his group.”

Remache pursed his lips. “Interesting.”

“I expected you to scoff about the common soldiers telling tales,” Gaspard said, raising an eyebrow.

Remache smiled. “That’s certainly possible, my lord, but remember that we are not too far from Lydes. And I have heard the peasants beg my chevaliers for help from things in the forest. Often it is near the site of a battle, where the dead rest uneasily.”

“The dead,” said Lienne de Montsimmard, “do no such thing.” She rode a small black mare that stepped so quietly Gaspard had not even noticed her approach through the wet grass.

“And the stories of corpses rising and taking arms against the living?” Remache asked.

“Spirits.” Lienne gestured at the forest ahead, leaning in the saddle. “All throughout the Dales, great battles once raged. Think of all that rage, all that death. Think of the rush of battle as you cut men down, my lord. As you felt their lives soak the grass because you overpowered them.”

Gaspard nodded. “Yes, Lienne, what of it?”

She smiled. “The spirits gather around that violence like moths around a lantern, pressing for a closer look, until the Veil between this world and the Fade is stretched thin. Where it breaks, the spirits steal in, desperate for a taste of what we mortals take for granted.” Her gaze grew distant. “The weaker ones possess something that cannot fight back, like a corpse … and as the spirits relive the battles they once witnessed, mimicking what they think of as life, we mortals only see a corpse rise and attack.”

“What about trees?” Gaspard asked, pointing with his chin at the forest that lay ahead of them. “The scouts tell me that the trees came to life and attacked.”

“Sylvans,” Lienne said, nodding. “Similar in nature to the corpses, but the spirits possessed trees instead of human bodies.” She dismounted,

frowning as she looked at the forest ahead, then readied her staff. “I can help, but you’ll want fire.”

Gaspard dismounted as well, frowning at the wet grass and the wet forest ahead. “Fire’s going to be hard to come by.”

“Then you’ll make do with blood, I suppose,” Lienne said with a shrug, and started walking. “A few dozen, no more. Otherwise, the stragglers will get lost … or found.”

Gaspard glared up at Remache, who was still mounted. “Have the archers ready fire arrows. Tell the chevaliers we go in on foot. A score of each, volunteers.”

“My lord.” Remache bowed and spurred his mount.

Gaspard, Remache, and the two-score warriors found the first sylvans a few hours later, near the crushed and mangled bodies of one of Gaspard’s men and what must have been one of Celene’s horses. As the tree lurched and cracked to life, pulling itself into some grotesque mockery of a man’s shape, Lienne inscribed a glyph upon the ground in glowing light, and it flared with a pure white radiance that sent the sylvan lumbering backward, tearing its own roots from the ground and roaring with fury. Gaspard’s archers peppered it with flaming arrows that seemed to sting the creature, and Lienne flung bolts of white light that cracked its bark, until finally it collapsed, charred and burning.

Lienne turned to Gaspard, smiling. “There will be more.”

“Then I’m glad you’re here with us, my dear.” Gaspard smiled and gestured for his scouts to keep moving.

As she and the scouts pressed on, Remache stopped beside Gaspard. “My lord.”

Gaspard turned. “A concern, Remache?”

“Your apostate.” Remache grimaced. “She wields significant power, and I would never speak ill of a child of Montsimmard…”

“Scares you, does she?” Gaspard smiled. “You and I are men of the world, Remache. Give us a problem that can be solved in court or on the battlefield, and we know just what to do. Talk about spirits and the Fade…”

Remache shook his head. “Did you see her face? Those spirits speak to her, or she wishes them to. And she has never been through the Circle’s Harrowing.”

“She has not,” Gaspard acknowledged. “Would you rather have faced that tree-creature without her magic?” At Remache’s look, he nodded. “Indeed. So for now, we must admit that there are terrible things beyond our comprehension in this world the Maker gave us … and Lienne de Montsimmard may well be one of them.”

“And should she become more dangerous to us than the trees?” Remache asked.

“I am no templar,” Gaspard said dryly, “but I believe that a yard of steel through the heart often works.”

Remache nodded wordlessly and gestured to the men.

They found more sylvans as the day wore on, and Gaspard got his men into a routine that handled the great beasts safely. Each time, Lienne’s magic held the creatures at bay, and Gaspard’s archers sank flaming shafts into them. The men were nervous, grumbling about fighting unnatural creatures, but when they saw the sylvans collapse into dead wood before ever reaching them, the men tightened their ranks with the discipline Gaspard expected.

Then, in the afternoon, the forest came for them.

One of Gaspard’s scouts called out as he found something—a scrap of cloth torn on a branch—and then the branch moved, twining around the scout’s head. Before an alarm could be raised, the great branches twisted and snapped taut, and the scout lurched into the sky, head wrenched from his shoulders and blood spraying as the body spun.

“Archers!” Gaspard yelled. “Fire arrows. Lienne!”

“Out of fire, my lord!” the lead archer yelled back, and Gaspard swore.

“Then shoot, then, for whatever damned good it will do!”

Lienne inscribed her glyph before her, and it flared and shone, and the sylvan roared and stumbled backward again, but the arrows that thudded into its trunk seemed to do little.

“More coming in from the flank, my lord!”

“Chevaliers, to arms!” Remache called, drawing his own sword. The sylvan flung back by Lienne’s magic was coming forward again, ignoring the arrows and swinging its branches like massive clubs.

Gaspard joined his chevaliers on the line as the archers fell back, hacking and hewing. Great branches crashed off his shield, driving him to his knees with each strike. He felt the man beside him go down and lunged over, slamming his shield up to batter aside a blow that would have finished off the chevalier. He chopped down and hacked the branch, sending a spray of black sap flying everywhere.

Then, even as he raised his blade, he felt energy coursing through him, a strength and vitality he hadn’t felt since the heady days of youth. The men on either side of him shouted a battle cry, and Gaspard glanced over and saw the glow of magic around them.

It was Lienne, then. Gaspard took whatever gift she was offering, lunged back to his feet, and swung his longsword as though it were a training wand, scything through bark and chopping deep into the sylvan with each strike. Beside him, his men yelled and swung great blows of their own, and the sylvan roared, fell back, and then collapsed with a flare of smoke into so much dead wood.

Still feeling the rush of Lienne’s magic, Gaspard turned. Off to one side, Remache guarded a chevalier who had fallen, heroically taking blow after blow from a great beast that dwarfed the ones they had seen so far.

The sylvan was huge, its trunk knotted and gnarled with age, and it held its branches not like grasping claws but like a great wooden cudgel. Remache barely came up to the thing’s thigh, and as another blow came down, he fell to one knee, still guarding the man who had fallen.

“Lienne!” Gaspard looked over his shoulder and saw her behind him, sweating. Her skin crackled with the same glow that hummed through his bones. “I need you!”

She took a breath. “It will not touch you, my lord.”

Gaspard nodded. “With me!” he yelled, and charged the great sylvan.

It saw him coming, and unlike the simple beasts they had killed earlier, this one had some measure of wits about it. Gaspard saw it shift to meet him, raise its great cudgel, and gesture with its other arm as though giving a challenge.

Then sickly black energy played across it, and the great sylvan shuddered and reeled back.

“You are old, tree, and once, in centuries past, you burned,” Lienne said from behind Gaspard. Her words were not loud, but magic lived inside them, and they cut through the air and struck the beast like flaming arrows. “*Remember*.”

The great sylvan screamed, shuddering, and Gaspard dashed forward and hacked at it. Magic crackled around him, and he felt his blade shift in his gauntlet, a tiny slip that changed the angle just slightly. When his blade sank into the sylvan, that tiny shift let the blade catch a seam Gaspard hadn’t even seen, sending black sap oozing. Around him, his men swung furiously, and every blow struck true, biting in deep and finding hidden weaknesses as the tree screamed and roared.

The great sylvan swung then, but it was weak and halting, and Gaspard sidestepped the blow that crashed to the ground beside him, and swung back with a great scything blow that cut bark away and revealed pale wood that bled black sap underneath. Without pausing, he reversed his grip and plunged his blade in.

The great sylvan went still, and Gaspard felt a sudden cold wind rush through the forest, cutting through armor and sending a chill spiking through the marrow of his bones. The sylvan seemed to sigh and relax, and then it was just a tree again, the black sap hissing into smoke and whipping away in a wind Gaspard could no longer feel.

“It is done,” Lienne said weakly from behind him, and he turned in time to see her fall.

Gaspard stumbled back, the strength fleeing his limbs as suddenly as it had come. Around him, men fell to their knees and shook their heads. “Tend

to her," he ordered, and the archers lifted her gently and carried her back to safety.

"Foolish girl." Remache leaned on his sword, breathing hard.

"Still want me to run her through?" Gaspard asked, and Remache laughed, then sobered as he checked on the fallen chevalier he'd been defending. "Is he alive?"

"I sincerely hope so," Remache said, feeling for a pulse. "I would be greatly disheartened to have risked my life so foolishly for a dead man."

Gaspard clapped him on the shoulder. "I have wronged you, Remache."

"You have not, my lord." Remache lifted his head and called to the others, "We'll need someone to tend this man's wounds!"

"I have. There is honor outside the chevaliers, and I am slow to recognize it. You have my apology."

"An apology from the Grand Duke of Orlais." Remache seemed to consider this as an archer trained with herbs came over to tend the fallen chevalier. "Impressive … though not as impressive as one from the emperor."

"I hope to improve your fortunes, then." Gaspard grinned and pulled his sword free from the great sylvan's body with a grunt, and the two went to see how Lienne fared.

They met no more sylvans for the remainder of the day, though all the men looked apprehensively to the trees. Lienne, riding behind Gaspard and Remache ably if carefully, explained that the great sylvan they had slain had likely kept the other spirits under its control, and with it gone, the rest would flee back to wherever they came from.

Gaspard had lit pyres for four men, and another ten were too injured to fight. He sent them back with a few able-bodied men to guard them. It felt wasteful, but his scouts insisted that Celene had no more than three or four men with her, and he was reasonably certain that twenty men, half of them chevaliers, could handle the empress.

And though he did not say it aloud, he found himself feeling the unexpected and wholly unwelcome sensation of guilt. Asking soldiers to

march into battle against men was one thing. Leading them into battle against unnatural magic was another thing entirely.

But Celene needed to be caught, for the safety of Orlais.

Late in the afternoon, they forded a river swollen from the rain. Not long after, the scouts found the bodies.

Gaspard heard the cry, and his first thought was that more trees were attacking. Then his mind, tired from battle and a long ride, realized that the cry had been for a discovery, not an alarm. He rode up along the animal track that had steadily grown larger and better maintained, until it was more a road than a path. Ahead, in a clearing, one of his scouts knelt by the body.

"What is it?"

"Elven, my lord. Dalish, going by the ironbark." The scout turned the body over, and Gaspard sucked in a breath. The elf looked to have been burned from the inside out, leaving only a charred husk behind.

"Lienne?" Gaspard called back. "Up front, please."

She rode up slowly, her staff out, and looked down. "Burned."

"Yes, dear. We gathered that. What would do such a thing?"

She shrugged. "I imagine we will find out."

Gaspard sighed and reminded himself that she had saved all their lives not long ago. To his scout, he said, "I'll take the lead now. Watch our flanks and pass word to keep your distance if you see anything moving." He'd be damned if he'd lose more of his men to magic today.

Gaspard rode forward with Lienne and, to his surprise, Remache. A few minutes later, they found another dead elf in the middle of the path, this one torn in half. A third hung from a tree, pinned to the trunk by a full score of arrows. Gaspard's scouts moved with arrows nocked, and the chevaliers had drawn their swords. Gaspard hadn't given the order, but he could hardly fault the men.

Finally, they rode into the Dalish camp.

The elves had been living in this part of the forest for years, long enough to carve out clearings and roads and likely set up surreptitious trade with the closest village.

They lived here no longer.

The clearing in the center of the camp was strewn with bodies. Old and young, man and woman, warrior and cook, all lay slaughtered like broken toys. Gaspard had seen battlefields in his time, and he had seen a few villages the morning after the chevaliers had celebrated. This put his experiences to shame.

“Maker, Remache,” Gaspard said quietly, hauling on the reins as his charger, trained to ride unflinchingly into battle, snorted and pawed at the ground. “What happened here?”

To a warrior and a strategist, the aftermath of a *normal* battle told a story. Here one group had come, taking fire from enemy archers. There a defensive line had collapsed, splitting a force in two. But this scene spoke only of chaos.

“I suspect that you wish to speak to Lienne, my lord, not me.” Remache shook his head. “No mortal men did this.”

“I don’t understand.” Lienne turned in the saddle, her knuckles white as she gripped the reins. “It must have been magic, some spirit, something, but … Look. There, an elf flayed, likely while still alive. And there, another boiled, if those burns are—”

“Your point, Lienne?” Gaspard asked. He didn’t look away. The Emperor of Orlais would not look away. But even elves did not deserve this.

“Demons are, above all, *simple*,” Lienne said, her voice shaking. “They will kill with fire, if that is what they enjoy. Or with claws, or blades, or magic that kills you as you sleep. But they will almost always find *something* they like, and they will not vary it. They lack the wit to do otherwise.”

“Then this is no demon,” Gaspard said, talking over her rather than allowing her to keep going. The men were shaken enough already, and Gaspard himself felt chills at what she suggested. “And whatever it is matters not, unless we have to kill it. What matters is Celene. Ignore this

slaughter," he called out to his scouts. "They're dead elves. We've all seen our share. Find me the trail."

The scouts dismounted slowly, looking from Gaspard to each other.

"Move!" Gaspard snapped, and they spread out, though their bows were still out, and they barely glanced at the ground as they made their way into the forest.

"You expect them to find anything in this mess?" Remache asked quietly beside him.

"Better than sitting here staring at it."

"True," Remache said. "I never expected to see the day that I pitied the elves for…" He trailed off. "There, my lord. Do you see it?"

Gaspard looked where Remache was pointing, to a wagon where a few dead warriors lay. "No."

Remache dismounted, and Gaspard followed as the lord made his way over and knelt to examine the bodies. "Broken neck," Remache said with quiet professionalism. "Slit throat. This one's been run through." He looked back up at Gaspard. "A bit mundane given the rest of the camp."

"Celene's champion." Gaspard nodded and shot Remache a grin. "If Lydes is not to your liking, you may have the makings of a good scout."

Remache stood, smiling as he wiped grass off his knees. "I shall bear that in mind, my lord."

"Scouts, over here!" Gaspard waved. "Celene was here, or her champion. Start here, and find out where they've gone … unless Lord Remache needs to take care of that as well."

"I can tell you where they have gone, my lord," said a young woman's voice.

Gaspard's blade was out and level as he turned. Remache drew his blade as well.

It was an elven girl, still in her teens, pretty if you liked that sort of thing, with the tattoos all the Dalish wore trailing down her pale face. She held a staff that glowed a sooty red, though it was not pointed at any of them, and her robes were stained with mud and blood.

“And who are you?” Gaspard asked, keeping his voice calm and confident. Around him, the scouts all quietly circled, ready for him to give word.

“I was Mihris, the First of Clan Virnehn,” she said. Gaspard nodded as though that meant something to him. “Do you seek the woman who claimed to be empress?”

“We do,” Gaspard said. At Remache’s look, he added, “We would also know what happened to your people here.”

“The warrior who served the empress killed the guards and freed her,” Mihris said, pointing at the wagon without looking. “Then he went to one of our sacred places and freed the thing that killed my people.”

Gaspard felt a chill, and he saw his men looking around uneasily.

“But it did not kill you,” Lienne said from behind him. As everyone else looked at *her*, Gaspard kept his eyes on Mihris, and he saw the flash of anger and shame before the elf’s face slid back to blank neutrality.

“Not me,” Mihris said, nodding. “You see, the warrior chose not to kill me when he could have.” She raised the hand that didn’t hold the staff and pushed back her hair, showing an ugly bruise on the side of her face. “That … interested the thing that killed my people, and it said that the warrior had insulted it, so it would let me live, that I might guide *you* to the eluvians … and gain revenge for my people against the man who destroyed them.” She held out her hand, and Gaspard saw that a massive ruby glittered in her palm. “It even gave me a way to help you follow them.”

“And what of you, First of Clan Virnehn?” Gaspard asked. It still meant nothing to him, but he had always been good with names. “You wish us to follow Celene and kill Ser Michel. That I understand. But what of you? Am I to let an apostate elven mage run free in exchange for her service?”

He hadn’t given the signal, and his men knew not to raise their weapons. Really, he had asked the question to gauge her response. He wasn’t disappointed.

Her head came up, and she met his gaze squarely. “No,” she said. “You are to let me come with you and kill Ser Michel myself. That is *my* choice.”

14

Briala had no idea how long they slept, but when Felassan eventually shook her awake, it felt as though the crushing fatigue of hard fighting and little sleep might finally be leaving her. She pulled Celene close for a moment on the rough blankets Felassan had found in the room. Celene tensed as she came awake, then relaxed against her.

It was strange, Briala thought. Every time she had slept beside Celene in Val Royeaux, she had awoken to find her empress already staring out the window at her empire, worrying about everything she would have to do that day. Was it sheer exhaustion that had finally given Celene a full night's sleep? Or was it because right here, in this ancient elven burial chamber, Celene had no empire to worry about?

Briala kissed the back of Celene's neck, ignoring the taste of old sweat. "I wish I could make you some tea."

"When this is over," Celene said, rolling over to face Briala and rubbing the sleep from her eyes, "I will have a new bed that puts my old bed to shame. The sheets will be spider-silk, the blanket woven by the finest artisans in Antiva, and the mattress and pillows will be stuffed with feathers plucked from desire demons."

Briala smiled. "I'm not certain how comfortable that would be. Do desire demons even possess feathers?"

"I will send for one that does." Celene kissed her, and though the kiss was short and simple, it still hit Briala with a humming thrill that warmed

her cheeks and made her whole body tingle.

She had Celene again. But for the tea, and the little ritual of putting on her mask as she snuck out of the room, this could have been any morning. And perhaps that made the burial chamber even better than the palace. No one would see them today, save Michel and Felassan. Briala had no need to sneak away.

What had happened at Halamshiral was a still-painful ache, but the elves *had* rebelled. Celene had done what she had to do. Had Briala been there, she might have been able to turn Celene to a different course, but Briala herself was the one who had left.

It was not Celene's fault that she had been maneuvered into doing what she had done, any more than it was Briala's fault for leaving Celene without the guidance she had wanted. It was Gaspard's fault. He had done this. He was to blame.

Briala silenced the unease at the back of her mind, reminding herself that hating Celene was exactly what Gaspard would have wanted her to do. She knew that she would always bear that ache, the pain of not having been able to end that rebellion cleanly, with less harm to the fools who had brought the empire's justice down upon them. But she could forgive Celene. She could.

And she would never leave the empress again.

The elves across Orlais would be free. Briala *could* do that, with Celene's help. Her empress would give her people the freedom they had so long deserved.

She buckled on her drakeskin armor, wincing at a few sore spots. "What now, *hahren*?"

"Now we journey to another world," Felassan said. "If we survive, it should be very interesting."

Michel, who was still putting on his armor, grunted. "You do little to inspire confidence."

Felassan ignored him. "These mirrors have been dormant for centuries. It would take powerful magic to awaken one. I might be able to do so, but

I'd need the rest of you to carry me for the rest of the day. But *you*, Empress, should have an easier time of it."

Briala watched Celene nod and draw forth the ruby from a pouch at her waist. She walked toward the eluvian. "What do I do, Felassan?"

"No idea."

"I don't think you need to do anything," Briala said, looking at the mirror. "It's already happening."

As Celene walked toward the eluvian, the blue-gray glass shifted. At first it seemed only to catch the light differently, a dull mirror catching a bit of Celene's reflection, but then shapes swirled in the mirror's surface, vague and billowy, like thunderclouds in a strong wind.

The ruby in Celene's grasp shone with sudden light, and the eluvian answered. The clouds across its surface flared, and then it was as though those clouds hid a blazing sunset, as the mirror's surface turned to waves of purple and crimson.

"Interesting." Felassan stepped past Celene and poked at the mirror's surface. Purple ripples shimmered away where he had touched, and he nodded. "Well, I didn't lose the finger. This may actually work."

Without hesitation, he stepped through the mirror and vanished. It was as though he had passed through the sheeting veil of a waterfall.

Briala jumped. "Wait!"

"Are we supposed to just follow him?" Michel asked, glaring as he strapped on the last of his armor.

"Presumably," Celene said, looking down at the ruby in her hand with narrowed eyes. "Bria, you and Michel should go first. If the mirror's magic fades as soon as I leave, you would be stranded here."

Briala nodded and gave Celene a small smile. "Then I will see you on the other side," she said, and walked forward.

She tensed as she reached the mirror, despite herself. Then, aware of Michel and Celene behind her, she straightened her back and continued, half convinced that she would simply bump into the glass and feel like a fool.

She did not bump into the glass.

It even *felt* like walking through the spray of a waterfall, if waterfalls were made of light. For a moment, cool energy pressed around her, and then it popped like a soap bubble, and she finished the step she had started, blinking at the dazzling light.

“We didn’t die!” Felassan said, and then, after a pause, added, “I think.”

When her vision cleared, Briala saw that they stood on a path whose stones were carved with the same runes that had adorned the sides of the tunnel last night. Unlike in the tunnel, however, the stones shone with brilliant light. The light seemed white, but when Briala looked away, it glittered with rainbows at the edge of her vision. The path stretched off into the distance ahead. Behind her, it ended at the eluvian, which looked here just as it had back in the burial chamber, only without the elaborate decorations.

Beyond the path, everything was hard to make out. The ground looked like grass, but it was gray and dim, despite the light coming from the stones of the path. Briala thought she could see trees in the distance, but they were merely smudged outlines against the horizon.

“What is this place?” she asked Felassan, who was rocking back and forth on his heels.

“You know, *da’len*, I honestly have no idea.” He leaned over and poked at the stones. “It’s not the Fade. The runes are elven … If I had to guess, I would say that our ancestors actually *created* some sort of tiny world between the eluvians.”

“Can that be done?”

“Apparently.” Felassan stepped off the path and reached down into the grass.

“The demon said not to do that.”

“The demon says a lot of things.” Felassan focused his gaze, and the gray grass around his hand filled with color, one lone spot of lush green in the strange dim meadow. “And this little world seems to like us.”

Briala was about to ask him to explain when Ser Michel stepped through the eluvian and onto the path.

“Maker’s breath!” he swore, shaking his head and stumbling. Briala reached out and grabbed one armored arm to steady him. A moment later, Celene came through as well. She stiffened, clutched her head, and dropped to one knee with a low cry.

“Felassan, what’s wrong?” It seemed worse for them than it had been for her. Celene shuddered, wincing, and used Briala for support as she slowly pulled herself up.

“I suspect that this land was made for the elves,” Felassan said as Michel stood up, stiff and awkward, wincing against the light. “Which they aren’t.”

“Majesty?” Michel asked. “Are you all right?”

Celene took a deep breath, shading her eyes against the light. “I will survive.” She looked at Briala thoughtfully. “Though it seems this is more comfortable for you, Bria.”

“So it seems.” Briala looked down at the brilliant runes. “It seems strange, but that is all. What about you, Michel?”

“It feels wrong.” Michel’s posture was stiff, and his hand twitched as though he wanted to draw his blade. “There’s a noise at the edge of hearing, and the light from those stones seems to twist when you look at it.” He shook his head. “I’d hate to have to fight in here.”

“And on that cheery thought, we should be off,” Felassan said. “If the humans are ready?”

Celene nodded, and they set off, with Felassan and Briala leading the way. The path stretched ahead of them, bright and unchanging, curving gently one way or the other, though it always felt as though they were walking straight ahead.

“It is amazing,” Briala said, matching her pace to Felassan’s. “I would never have thought to see such a display meant for our people.”

“It’s a bit hard to take in,” Felassan said, “especially when almost every elf you’ve ever seen is a servant in secondhand clothes or a peasant in the slums.” He shook his head. “We had an empire. It was … everything one

thinks of when one hears such a word. Do you understand? Take the richest district of Val Royeaux. That was our people."

Briala smiled to think of it. "It must have been beautiful, if they had the power to craft a world between the eluvians."

"From what little survives among the Dalish, it was." Felassan sighed. "Take the richest district of Val Royeaux, and add the magic that was part of our everyday life. Every statue fountain could speak through the water that poured from her mouth. Every column glowed with runes that the fools in Tevinter copied by rote like children tracing letters. When night fell, the roads were lit by stones like these, bright enough to find your way safely, but soft enough that you could still see the stars."

"I can only imagine."

"Can you?" Felassan looked over sharply. "Can you, truly? Then tell me, *da'len*, who scrubbed the floors?"

She blinked. "I … if the stone is enchanted, then … perhaps it cleans itself. Or if our people had golems, like the dwarves…"

"We were an empire," Felassan said again, and this time she heard the anger in his voice. "It was not the Golden City. It was not the peaceful afterlife of this Maker the humans have made for themselves. Take the richest district of Val Royeaux, and tell me how many fools are scheming against each other at every ball? How many servants are flogged for improperly arranging the silverware?"

"We were the nobles." It hit Briala like a blow. She remembered a slow trickle of blood winding toward the spot where she had hidden in the reading room of Celene's childhood estate, where her parents had died on the orders of Lady Mantillon.

"We were *everyone*. There were no humans, no dwarves, no race but the elves. Every atrocity you seek to avenge for your broken people in their alienages, elven nobles committed upon elven servants."

Briala swallowed. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Your empress," he said. "You trust her. You believe she will free your people."

“I do,” Briala said without hesitation.

“Then who’s going to scrub the floors?” Felassan asked, and smiled.

“You distrust her because she is human.”

“No.” Felassan paused. “Well, all right, *yes*, but more than that, I distrust her because she has successfully ruled an empire. No one who does that cedes power. Even if they are wise. Even if it is for the best, in the long run. Even if failing to do so will ultimately destroy everything.”

It was too close to what the little voice in the back of Briala’s mind had suggested. She silenced it as it started again and glared at Felassan. “Celene is different.”

“She most certainly is,” Felassan said, and stopped.

Briala paused as well. The air around her still hummed with the soothing rainbow light from the runes on the path, and the air felt cool and clean with each breath.

She looked back and saw Celene and Michel far in the distance behind them, struggling with each step and squinting against what was, for them, the harsh light of the path.

Briala didn’t feel winded, even after the strenuous work of the last few days. She and Felassan had been walking normally, their pace relaxed. She would have sworn it.

“The path favors us more than it does them.”

“It does indeed. Even walking at their pace, we will reach in hours what would have taken us days in the normal world. But this magic touches us in a special way, as it can never touch them.” Felassan lowered his voice. “And if you wish to do more than scrub the floors, you will need *that* much more than the goodwill of your empress.”

“We will see,” Briala said, and smiled back at Celene.

* * *

Michel saw Briala turn and smile at Celene. Beside him, Celene returned it.

Michel’s empress looked tired, but the smile seemed sincere despite the lines around her eyes and the still-healing bruise on her head. She looked

happy despite the discomfort of this strange world she and Michel now walked through, a woman in love.

He didn't realize that he had been caught staring until Celene said, "You disapprove."

Briala and Felassan were already pulling ahead again. They did not seem to be walking any faster than Celene and Michel, but each time Michel looked up, the elves were further ahead, shadows against the twisting purple light of the stones. He blinked and looked up and away, shaking the twisting light from his eyes. It was not as bad if he didn't look at the stones themselves. When he stared directly at them, the whole world twisted under him like a ship in stormy weather.

"It is hardly my place to approve or disapprove, Majesty."

"Stop, Michel." Celene quickened her pace as the elves moved ahead of them, and Michel hurried to match it. "You need not fear retribution for speaking your mind. It might actually take my mind off this damned light."

"Does your head ache?"

"Abominably."

Michel nodded. "I confess a small and unworthy bit of satisfaction that it is not solely me."

They walked on, and Michel thought.

Briala and her bow, and her obviously hand-tailored armor, and her silverite daggers. A whole side of the empress that he had never known about. Had they spent every night together? Surely the guards outside her room would have spread the word. Servants could never keep a secret.

Except that Briala clearly had.

"Briala has proven herself capable," Michel said after a moment.

"She has been my eyes and ears for most of my reign," Celene said, and again, Michel saw the fond little smile. "She has always been there for me."

"And you have promised to free her people," Michel said.

This time, Celene was silent. Michel looked up and saw Briala and Felassan waiting, shadows surrounded by the twisting light that hurt his eyes.

“We needed her,” Celene said, slowing her pace ever so slightly. “And she needed to know that I cared about the elves.”

“After Halamshiral.”

“Yes.” She said it without hesitation, but her voice was low.

“Which was necessary, Majesty, because the nobles were given to fear that you cared overmuch for the elves.”

Celene sighed. “We needed her,” she repeated. “I needed her, Michel. Without her help, we would have died in that Dalish camp.”

“They distracted a few guards,” Michel said, looking back down at his boots. “I could have freed you without them, Majesty.”

“Then perhaps *I* needed her trust, my champion.” Celene rubbed her eyes and grimaced. “I have fawning courtiers and scheming nobles enough, but she has served me since childhood. I needed her.”

“And when you return to Val Royeaux, and gather your strength to crush Gaspard…”

“We will have the element of surprise, thanks to the eluvians,” Celene finished, “and we will gain the peasant elves, who will know, thanks to Briala, that they fight for their freedom.”

“And you will lose the nobles who rule them,” Michel said bluntly. “I will fight for you until the blood no longer flows in my veins, Majesty, but how many lords will side with Gaspard to keep the elves under control?”

“Several.” Celene leaned in closer to Michel, still walking slowly. “Perhaps the elves will find their freedom once Gaspard has been dealt with. It may be spread among the elves in whispers. The nobles need not hear of it.”

“You think she will accept that?”

“Why would she not, Michel?”

“Majesty…” He paused. “It is—”

“It *is* your place to say.”

“You said that you needed Briala for *you*. I can only imagine she feels the same way.” He considered raising the possibility that Briala was using Celene, but that would almost certainly do nothing but anger his empress.

“Now, though you need her as a person, you must trade promises and innuendos with her as though she were one of the nobles you strive to keep happy.”

Celene sighed. For a moment, she was not his empress, just a woman walking painfully beside him, trying to find her way through a dark land. “That is the choice I have always had to make, my champion.”

“This wretched place makes my eyes ache, Majesty, but for her, it is the dream of elven greatness come to life. Do you expect her to come out of this land and put her servant’s mask back on?”

“I do.” Celene spoke with confidence, but she squinted up ahead all the same to where Briala and Felassan walked far ahead. “Bria has helped me play the Game for years, Michel. I doubt that an enchanted path will change that.”

Michel remembered a boy from the slums of Montfort. After Michel’s mother had died, they had run together with a few others. It had been a pitiful gang, but he and the other boy had fought hard to keep their people safe.

On the day Comte Brevin had found him, Michel had found his friend being beaten by another gang. With nothing more than a large stick, Michel had fought the older boys back to save his friend.

Comte Brevin had seen it and been impressed. He had called from his coach for Michel to come over and tossed a pouch filled with coins to make it clear that he meant well.

Michel had gotten into the coach.

His friend, only then getting to his feet, had given him a confused look, and Michel had given a sort of half-wave.

He had never seen his friend again. He did not even remember the boy’s name.

“Majesty, people who find a chance for a new life, a new power…” Michel looked back down at his boots, ignoring the sting of the light from the stones. “They do what they must in order to keep it.”

“Celene! Michel!” Michel looked up at Briala’s excited shout. Not far in the distance, she and Felassan had stopped. Michel would have sworn to the Maker that the path ahead had been empty for miles ahead, but now it ended at another of the magical mirrors.

The elves waited while Celene and Michel caught up with them. Michel was annoyed to see that they both looked relaxed and calm, as though they had enjoyed a pleasant stroll in the park instead of a world of discomfort that had already given him a headache with its twisting light and its sound ringing in his ears.

As they approached, the mirror flashed like the one back in the first chamber had, and red light streaked through the clouds on its surface.

“I cannot wait to be free of this place,” Celene muttered, and Michel chuckled despite himself.

He stepped through the mirror without hesitation, walking right past Briala and Felassan. The strange prickling energy rolled across his skin, then slid away, and when it left, so did all the pain he had been feeling. The air was cool, and the room was dark and smelled of stone and dust, but it was normal, with none of the strange magic that had plagued him on the elven path.

The only light in the room came from the eluvian, and as Michel turned, Briala and Felassan walked out. Celene followed them a moment later.

“Ah, normalcy,” Felassan said, and raised his staff. Light flared, and the rest of the room came into view.

It was a huge circle, at least as large as the throne room in Val Royeaux, and filled with row after row of sarcophagi. Runes in the ceiling picked up the light from Felassan’s staff and glowed gently, without the blinding pain of those on the path.

And spaced evenly around the walls of the great circular room were eluvians.

“Is this the central chamber?” Michel asked. If one of those eluvians led back to Val Royeaux, they could be back at the palace before sunset … although it would mean walking upon the damned path again.

It would also mean that his empress would have to decide how she would handle Briala, but that was for her, not him.

“Not quite,” Felassan said, “though this at least offers us a number of options. Each eluvian links to another by one of the paths, and one of them may lead to the chamber where *all* the eluvians may be awakened.”

Celene grimaced. “But with the gem the demon gave us, we can already awaken any we need. Can we not simply use it to go to Val Royeaux?”

“Certainly.” Felassan made a gesture that took in the whole room. “Which one of these will take you there?” Celene sighed, and Felassan smiled. “Ah, you see. Imshael said the ruby would lead you to the central chamber. Without it, you’ll be walking blindly along those paths for quite some time, hoping you don’t end up in the middle of Tevinter.”

Celene nodded irritably. “I know. The path was quite uncomfortable for some of us. You will forgive my momentary wish to limit the number of times I experience it.” She took the gem from the pouch at her waist and held it up. “I believe we are meant to go through … that one,” she said, pointing to one of the mirrors on the far side of the room. “Though perhaps we might rest first.” She smiled at Michel as she said it.

“I would not mind a few minutes of peace before we step into that world again, Majesty.” He shook his head, and something dim and uneven on the floor caught his eye. “Although it seems the path was even less comfortable for some.”

The others followed his gaze and saw the ancient skeletal remains lying on the floor in fine silks that time had reduced to rags. Some of the bodies were near each other, the ancient bones entwined as though the elves had held each other for comfort before the end. Others lay alone, curled in upon themselves like children.

“No weapons,” he said after a moment, moving toward one of the bodies curiously.

“Be careful,” Briala said. She was crouched, squinting as she looked at the ground and gently traced the stones with her fingers, and Michel realized after a moment that she was searching for traps.

Sitting calmly on the edge of a sarcophagus, Felassan answered Michel. “Servants, not guards. Trapped in here when the eluvians went dormant. Note that there are no natural exits from the room.”

“That’s…” Briala checked herself and looked back at the floor. “… tragic,” she said after a moment, and worked a knife into the seam between two stones. “I believe I’ve found the central point for this chamber’s traps.”

“I wonder how they ended up here,” Felassan said. “Maybe the eluvians didn’t all go dormant at once? Maybe they were fleeing, hoping to get to a chamber with a way outside, only to end up … here.”

Something in the strange elf’s voice was wrong. Michel looked over sharply. Felassan’s eyes were unfocused as he looked out across the great room, and his fingers tapped an odd rhythm on the sarcophagus. Michel remembered the feeling when the Dalish elves had fallen into their trance, when they had freed him and ignored him as he left.

“Felassan…”

“Can you imagine it?” Briala asked, her fingers still working at the knife that was stuck into the seam between the stones. “Trapped in here, knowing that you were condemned to die for … for what?” Her voice sounded strained as well. “The pride and honor of the nobles who sealed you in here?”

“I am certain the nobles fared just as poorly on the surface,” Celene said gently.

“Majesty, wait.” Michel felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickling.

Briala didn’t seem to hear either of them. Her voice was raw now. “They played their games, while the servants bled and died for them. Hiding down here, waiting to be found, surrounded by corpses that were dressed better than they were!”

“Their last moments,” Felassan said softly, “would have been filled with hunger and rage.”

Twitching and popping, the bones on the ground began to move.

“Majesty, the corpses.” Michel stepped forward and slapped Felassan sharply across the face. As the elf blinked and shook his head, Michel

turned and slapped Briala as well.

“I see them, my champion.” Celene drew her daggers. “Suggestions?”

While most of the Academie’s training centered on fighting other armored men, the chevaliers could hardly have claimed such excellence had they not been prepared to fight less common enemies. Michel had studied templar techniques to fight mages and Grey Warden tactics to fight darkspawn.

And, in grim tests at the sites of old battles, shivering in his armor, Michel had learned to fight the dead.

There were dozens of them. The poor elven servants who had died had all congregated in this chamber, it seemed. They dragged themselves to their feet, ancient bones creaking and popping, tattered rags tearing. The eye sockets of the skulls were lit with cold light.

“They’re unarmed, at least,” Celene said, turning slowly in a circle. They were surrounded.

“No.” Briala’s voice was shaky, but she was herself again. “Look at their hands, their teeth.” The bones had stretched and warped, hands curving into savage claws and mouths gleaming with jagged fangs.

“Felassan!” Michel called, readying his sword and bringing up his shield. “Can you call forth your magic?”

Felassan hopped up onto one of the sarcophagi and raised his staff, not as a magical implement but as a simple weapon. “Certainly,” he said. “Of course, doing so will weaken the Veil even further and let more of these things into the room.”

“Then stay out of the way.” The corpses, finally on their feet, shambled forward, claws ready. Though they had no throats left, an eerie predatory hiss rattled from their fanged mouths. Michel took stock of his enemies and allies and moved. “Briala, with him on high ground. Rain fire on the back ranks. Majesty, my flank.”

Without waiting to see if they listened, Michel raised his shield and moved in.

A warrior could gain honor by killing bandits, defeating another warrior in a formal duel, or even hunting down some great beast. All of those enemies were alive, and a fight against them meant matching will and strength against something else that possessed a desire to live.

A fight against corpses and darkspawn, though, was butchery. There was no honor, no glory, only the grim pride in knowing that the world had one less monster in it.

Michel smashed back a corpse with his shield, brought down his sword and crushed the skull of another, and slammed his shoulder into a third that was trying to close. He stepped, raised his shield to knock away dagger-sharp claws, and shattered another corpse's shoulder with a second overhand strike.

They never learned, even as he struck down a third, then a fourth. It was simple, in the same way that running in full armor from sunrise to sundown was simple. If he had the discipline and strength to keep them from overwhelming him, he would grind them all to dust. If he faltered, due to fatigue or fear, he would die.

Block, step, smash, step. His breath was tight in his chest. All around him, the corpses hissed and snarled. Claws curled around the edge of his shield. As his blade grew heavy, it was tempting to let the dead pull on the shield, use their pull to guide his next step.

Michel had watched a fellow trainee give in to that temptation, trying a flashy move to cover his fatigue. The corpses had torn his throat out moments later.

He wrenched his shield free from their grasp, smashed the bodies back and crushed another skull with the same Maker-cursed overhand blow. Block, step, smash, step.

At the edge of his vision, he saw Celene slashing the horde with her daggers. Iron or steel would have done little to bone, but Celene's silverite blades sheared through the corpses' claws, trailing flames that scorched the dull yellow to black. She had taken down few of them, but she kept them from flanking Michel, which was enough.

In the back ranks, skulls shattered like clay target vases as Briala fired shot after shot from her bow. Like Michel's simple work, it was more a practice exercise than an art form.

Block, step, smash, step. Michel slipped on a flopping arm bone, recovered, and swung his blade in a great sweep that knocked the closest corpses back before they could swarm him. Sloppy, too sloppy. His old masters would have had his hide for that. Tired and lazy, loose steps leading to missteps. The longsword, a noble blade of shining silverite, felt like a great stone hammer, and a voice at the back of his mind began to whisper, as it always had during the longest drills.

Just put more into each swing, and rest for a second when the blade digs in.

Drop the shield and switch to a two-handed grip. It will be so much easier with both arms.

Or even better than that, just run. Run before you make the mistake that gets you killed. Before you slip up and show them that you're just a fake, just a boy from the slums.

"I am," he growled through gritted teeth, "Ser Michel de Chevin."

Block, step, smash, step.

"I am Ser Michel de Chevin." Another skull shattered. A trio of corpses raked claws along his armor, and he crushed their hands to dust with a swipe of his shield, slammed them back, and set himself in the proper stance, though his legs burned and his back screamed.

"I am Ser Michel de Chevin!" An arrow buzzed past his face and punched through a corpse's skull, and he blocked, stepped, and smashed another, then stepped to his next target only to find the great burial chamber before him strewn with scattered limbs and smashed bones.

He took in a great gasping breath and, despite himself, let out a laugh as he leaned against a sarcophagus. He had no idea how many corpses had risen and fallen, but the dark voice at the back of his mind was wrong. His old masters would have been proud.

Then, from behind them came a voice.

“You are *indeed* Ser Michel de Chevin,” said Grand Duke Gaspard, “and I have been looking forward to avenging the death of my bard.”

* * *

Celene’s world went from hot to cold in an instant as she turned to look at the grand duke.

Gaspard had come in through the same eluvian they had used. It was still active behind them, and Celene had no idea whether it was because of her ruby, or if Gaspard had somehow made his own bargain with the demon.

He stood at the edge of the room, flanked by Lord Remache and a young woman robed in gray satin, holding a staff that glowed soft white. Behind them, soldiers were still stepping through the eluvian.

They were outnumbered, and badly. Michel, though he held himself proud and tall, had to be exhausted.

Still, it had to be now. If the rest of Gaspard’s men got through the door, they would have no chance.

She opened her mouth to order the attack, and a tiny motion at the edge of her vision caught her eye. It was Briala, shaking her head ever so slightly.

“Grand Duke Gaspard,” Celene said smoothly, “you continue to impress me. Though you could have arrived a few moments earlier and offered assistance.”

“With the dead?” Gaspard grinned. “I’d have been honor-bound to assist you had you asked. Good thing for me I arrived late.”

Celene stepped back, a simple, prudent move that put a stone sarcophagus between her and Gaspard and also put Briala more clearly in her line of vision. Briala had an arrow nocked in her bow, raised but not drawn. As Celene glanced over, Briala tapped her bow with her little finger. Anyone not trained in the bardic arts would have simply thought it the nervous gesture of a sloppy fighter.

From one bard to another, Briala’s gesture meant, “Encourage them to approach.”

Celene had no idea what Briala intended, but the gesture carried with it the implicit suggestion of a plan, which was more than Celene had at the moment. “Will you not be reasonable, Gaspard? How many lives have you thrown away in this play for power? How many more will die because you refused to play the Game?”

“*Your* game,” Gaspard said, “not mine. As for how many more…” He shrugged, grinning. “Enough. But fewer of mine.”

He was too assured. She needed him off balance. “And if I accepted your marriage proposal?”

Gaspard’s smile faded. “I offered in good faith, Celene. This, now, is another of your little games. I will not match you in a battle of words. I never could.” As more soldiers crowded in behind him, he stepped forward.

Celene glanced at Briala, who signaled “not yet.”

“If you think so little of your skill with words,” she said, “then you may not find the throne of Orlais quite as comfortable as you think. You have all of you overreached. Brutish warriors who think you can keep the empire safe by swinging your swords hard enough.” She glanced over at the man beside Gaspard. “Duke Remache, who fancies himself the next grand duke despite never becoming a chevalier. And … young Lady Lienne de Montsimmard,” she said, making a guess from the girl’s familiar features, “who believes Gaspard will protect an apostate even after he has the Circle to serve him. The future high nobility of the empire…” Celene smiled coldly. “Cowering at the door while their empress and her champion fight the dead.”

“Yes, Celene, it’s called tactics,” Gaspard said with a sigh. Celene noted that Remache took the barb angrily, while Lienne shrugged without concern. “It’s this novel concept the chevaliers taught me while you were pandering to the Chantry and trading innuendos with the courtiers. And did that work, by the way? Have you kept the templars and the mages from dragging our glorious empire into war?”

“You made that rather a moot point when *you* dragged our glorious empire into war.” Celene shook her head, and with the motion saw Briala

gesture ever so slightly with one foot. She was pointing at her dagger, still lodged in the floor plate that controlled the chamber's ancient traps. And with that, Celene understood. "And when we lose more land to Ferelden or Nevarra," she added, "you will doubtless claim that it was not your fault, raging at your defeat in battles you should never have had to fight."

Gaspard glared. "But I believe I'll win this one, Celene," he said, and stepped forward again as more soldiers came through the mirror into the room. "Archers, ready. If your former empress wishes to swear her loyalty to me, she lives." One last figure stepped through the mirror. To Celene's surprise, it was the young elven healer from the Dalish camp. "The mirror?"

"It closed behind us," the elf said, and gave Celene a chilly look. "But if you get the gem she carries, I can activate any eluvian we need."

"I'll have it for you in a minute. Celene?" He smiled, and when she said nothing, Gaspard said, without breaking eye contact, "Men, if she and her people are foolish enough to fight, kill them where they stand." Then he glanced over at Briala. "At least you'd be buried with your people."

"Do you remember what you told me as I sat in the prisoner's wagon, Gaspard?" Briala asked, stepping down slowly from the sarcophagus.

Gaspard raised an eyebrow. "That you were easier on the eyes than I was?"

As Briala landed, she kicked her dagger free.

"No. You told me I was dangerous."

As she dove behind a sarcophagus, arrows hissing past her, Briala fired a single shot of her own.

It was a lazy, wobbling shot from a half-drawn bow that would never punch through armor or lodge in bone.

It was, however, enough to trigger the small pressure plate on the floor near Gaspard.

A roar of flame shattered the air in an explosion of light and sound. The impact slammed Celene to the ground, her ears ringing, and flame arced over the spot where she had stood. As she dazedly tried to breathe, she realized that the explosion had not knocked her down. Michel had,

shielding her with his own body. He rolled free, coming back to his feet smoothly, but Celene saw that his armor smoked.

The ground where Gaspard and his men had stood was scorched black, and most of the soldiers were charred husks on the floor, new corpses joining the old. Gaspard himself, his armor scorched and smoking like Michel's, was back on his feet, face grim. Remache was on his knees a few yards away, coughing, and Lienne was still and unmoving on the ground, while the elven healer, sheathed in a glow of crackling magical energy, looked down at her curiously.

Behind them, the eluvian they had all come through was lined with a spider web of cracks, and its surface was dull gray and lifeless.

"For the empress!" Michel shouted, and lunged at Gaspard. Gaspard brought up his shield. The two chevaliers met in a ringing clash of steel, and Michel pressed forward, sending Gaspard stumbling back, frantically blocking Michel's furious assault.

It seemed that the time for talking had passed, and for her own part, Celene was ready to kill someone.

One of Gaspard's men struggled to his feet, and without hesitation, Celene darted forward, kicked him behind the knee, and slit his throat. Another warrior, badly burned but still conscious, got his sword out, but then an arrow sprouted from his throat, and he collapsed wordlessly.

"As Ser Michel said, for the empress." Back on her feet, Briala nocked another arrow, and Celene spared her a small smile.

Then she turned to Remache, who was getting back to his feet. "Ah, Duke Remache." Celene lunged in, sidestepped his clumsy slash, and lashed out with a slice that opened his cheekbone. "You should truly have reconsidered your career as a playwright."

"Michel." The cold hatred made Celene look, and she saw that it was the elven healer, raising her staff as she spoke.

Around her, energy played, light twisting, and with a sickening twist in her gut, Celene saw tendrils of light coil around the nearby bodies of the

dead. Energy hissed from the corpses, and the elven healer glowed as though lit from within.

“Briala, the elf!” Celene dove back from Remache and lunged for the healer, but Remache sidestepped to place himself between them. Snarling under the blood that poured from his cheek, he swung at Celene wildly, and his reach, if not his skill, forced her to give ground.

Gaspard shoved Michel back, shield to shield, and lashed out with a high slash. Michel turned it away with stunning speed and stepped in with a low kick that caught Gaspard in the leg and sent him stumbling. Michel followed with a high overhand strike, and Gaspard caught it with his shield, only to cry out as Michel’s shield slammed into his own and staggered him.

“Michel,” the elven healer said, her voice echoing through the chamber, and this time even Michel heard it. “You should have killed me.”

She raised her hands as though cupping the air between them, and then she hardened her hands into claws.

The air around Michel hummed, and then a smoky field of energy shimmered around Celene’s champion. It coalesced around him, and Michel shouted, slashing at it uselessly. Then he grunted, struggling against the strength of the magic, and Celene heard the slow keening whine of his armor buckling.

Remache seemed stupefied, staring in sick fascination at the glowing magic that was crushing Michel. Celene darted past him. “Briala!” she shouted, and lunged at the elven healer, who still shimmered with glowing energy pulled from the corpses around the room.

A handbreadth from the elven mage’s throat, Celene’s daggers glanced harmlessly off a shimming barrier of arcane energy. A moment later, Briala’s arrow shattered on the same barrier.

The elf didn’t even spare them a glance. She had eyes only for Michel, who had fallen to one knee, straining against the crushing strength of her magic.

“You killed my people!” she called, as Michel groaned. “You killed everyone I loved!”

“Oh, good, we’re showing off esoteric magical talents,” Felassan called, pulling himself upright with smoke still trailing from his cloak. “Can I go next?” His own staff thrummed with power as he spun it in a fast circle, and a wave of rippling force exploded through the room.

It washed over Celene, and the room plunged into darkness.

For one terrifying heartbeat, she thought she’d been stricken blind, but then she saw that the eluvians still shimmered around the room, save the one that was cracked. She also saw a pale glow around Michel where he knelt—the spectral light wavering and falling into wispy nothingness like a chalk drawing in the rain.

Celene realized then what Felassan had done. He had cast away all nearby magic.

The elven healer screamed, and Celene looked over to see her contorted in pain as tendrils of energy crackled around her. All of her magic, the protective barrier and whatever power she had wrung from the corpses nearby, hissed along her skin. Her staff fell to the ground, its red light dimming.

Felassan’s staff flickered, and then cast out its light once more, bathing the whole room in the same gentle glow as before. The elven healer was on the ground, shaking, and everyone else was still for a moment. Remache had his hand pressed to his bleeding face. Briala stared at Felassan in awe, and even Gaspard seemed unsure of what to do next, taking a few steps back and looking from person to person with his guard raised. Michel, still on his knees, was pale and sweating, and his armor was marred with dents where the spectral force had nearly crushed the life out of him.

To Celene’s surprise, Felassan himself looked more worried than exultant.

“An enhanced dispelling, which can provide a nasty backlash on anyone surrounding herself with too much ambient magic,” he said to the silence. “And if I could please ask all the mages present to avoid *any more big flashy magic* in the room with the very thin Veil, lest something decide to come through?”

With the low rumble of ancient stone, the lids of the three largest sarcophagi in the room slid open.

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Ser Michel had never been in this much pain. Not during his childhood in the slums, not during the harsh training at the Academie.

Whatever Felassan had done to break the elven girl's spell had helped him as well. Some remaining energy sent soothing warmth through his limbs, easing the biting pain of ribs he was sure had cracked under the strain. Still, his momentary advantage over Gaspard was gone. The grand duke would find Michel little challenge, he knew, even as he struggled to his feet and set himself to stop his knees from shaking.

But Gaspard didn't attack. He was not even looking at Michel. Instead, he stared at the far end of the room, sword and shield raised in the *Spear-fisher* guard. It was a defensive position, used to recover from fatigue, and most chevaliers derided it as the guard to choose when you knew yourself to be outclassed. Blinking, Michel followed Gaspard's stare and saw why.

Three of the great sarcophagi in the chamber had opened, and from them rose corpses. But unlike the simple clawed horrors Michel had slain by the score a few minutes past, these were clearly beyond anything he had trained for.

Two of the creatures were simple skeletons, but even as they stood, the air around them shimmered with magic, and then spiked armor, bulky and hideously impractical to move in, formed around them. Each held a greatsword as long as Michel was tall, and under the spiked helms, cold light flared from empty sockets. Michel had heard legends of these

creatures: revenants, deadly warriors that would kill every living creature they could find.

The third figure, Michel had no name for. It rose into the air, and energy swirled around it like a great golden wind, solidifying into glittering red and gold robes. Its bony claws crackled with energy, and it held no other weapon. Around its head, the magic formed a golden skullcap, and beneath it, gray skin formed a mockery of a face, with eyes that burned like coals staring out balefully.

"An *era'harel*," Felassan hissed, and Michel was surprised to hear very mortal anger and fear in the elf's voice. "It's, ah, a demon-mage, essentially. Only worse than that sounds."

Michel looked back at the others. Briala and Celene were up, as was Remache. Felassan looked exhausted from whatever magic he had used. Gaspard's mages were even worse. The elven healer was still on the ground, shaking, while the young noble was unconscious.

Of Gaspard's soldiers, there were no survivors. They had either died in the blast or, worse, been left on that Maker-damned path between mirrors for all eternity when the eluvian had cracked.

"Gaspard!" Celene said sharply. "I would say we have common cause."

The grand duke looked back at her, then at the horrors rising from their tombs. "Agreed." He looked over at Michel, and his lips twitched with a tiny smile. "Come, then, brother. Let us show these things how wrong they were to face Orlesian chevaliers on the field of battle."

Gaspard had to know that Michel was barely on his feet. It could have been encouragement or insult, but either way, it was enough of a goad to set Michel's back straight. He raised his blade into the *Spear-fisher* guard, tightened his grip on his shield, and gave Gaspard a solemn nod. "Agreed."

Then he lumbered forward, grimacing through the pain as each step made his dented armor dig into his shoulders and side. Gaspard matched his gait—not a full charge, for only a fool would charge such unknown and powerful creatures, but a jog that would put the force of their armored bodies behind their first blows.

“You must slay the demon-mage!” Felassan called from behind them. “*Da’len*, clear a path!”

Fast as lightning, an arrow punched into the armor of the revenant on the right, even as a boulder smashed into the one on the left. Breath whistling in his lungs, Michel ran past the revenants at the mage-corpse, the one Felassan had called *era’harel*.

He had almost reached the thing when it raised its hands. Energy rained down from above and drove Michel to his knees. The room spun, and only years of training kept his sword from falling from nerveless fingers.

It would have been so easy to let it end. He had slain a roomful of the dead. No one could accuse him of doing less than his duty. Even the chevaliers had their limits, and the reanimated corpse of an ancient elven mage was certainly a worthy foe. Somewhere in the distance, fire roared and lightning crackled as Felassan brought his power to bear.

Then the ground lurched *again* beneath Michel, and with a sickening twist, he found himself standing not before the mage-corpse, but before one of the revenants. Though half a dozen arrows sprouted from its breastplate and greaves, it held its greatsword without concern.

Michel barely had time to raise his shield before the first blow slammed down, faster than any mortal man could have swung such a weapon, and the force nearly tore Michel’s shield from his arm. Even as he stumbled, the blade came back up with blinding speed, smashing through Michel’s guard and spinning him back.

Michel slammed hard into a sarcophagus, and the physical shock of the blow was enough to knock the fog from his mind. He came to his senses just in time to see the great blade coming down at him. Staggered and leaning against the stone behind him, Michel had no defense.

Gaspard’s shield caught the blow.

The grand duke himself was driven to his knees by the force of the blow—he had leaped, Michel realized belatedly, to stop what would surely have been a deathblow from landing. Even the revenant seemed caught off-guard, stumbling back momentarily.

Gaspard could die right here, Michel realized, and if he did, he would die having defended another chevalier who was too frightened and tired to fight for himself.

Ser Michel de Chevin, champion of Empress Celene of Orlais, would not allow that to be his legacy.

With a roar, Michel leaped up and chopped down on the revenant's arm, shearing through magical armor and ancient bone just below the elbow. Instead of falling free, the arm hung in place, and Michel saw tendrils of magic snaking out from the severed limb. Snarling, Michel drove the lip of his shield into the wound, and as the revenant hissed in rage, Michel leaned in and smashed the pommel of his sword into the thing's face.

It grunted, flailing and trying to free its arm from Michel's shield, to bring its fearsome sword to bear, and then it raised its other arm, gauntleted fingers curled into claws.

Gaspard chopped the revenant's other hand off at the wrist with a savage laugh. The grand duke met Michel's eyes and gave him a tiny nod. Then both men broke free from the revenant, turned in unison, and struck at the ancient warrior from both sides.

Michel's blow chopped into its torso. Gaspard's blow tore into its shoulder. The unnatural creature fell back, wisps of magic leaking from it like a bloody spray, and an arrow buzzed past Michel's ear, hissed under the revenant's helmet, and exploded out the back of the thing's skull.

An ancient skeleton, cracked and broken all over, fell to the ground bare and naked.

Michel drew himself up, knowing that the battle-fury that was currently keeping him on his feet could desert him at any moment. The other revenant stood over the fallen form of Duke Remache, but it was falling as well, frosted with ice that made even its spectral armor hiss and squeal as it cracked. An arrow lodged in its breastplate, and then a ball of fire roared through the chamber, and when the smoke cleared, the armor and the blade were gone, and only a charred skeleton fell to the ground, crumbling into dust as it landed.

The mage-corpse floated forward, its hands raised with energy crackling between them.

Michel rushed at it, blade swinging wildly in an attempt to disrupt whatever spell the creature was preparing, but before he reached it, Celene stepped out from the shadows behind a sarcophagus and plunged her daggers into the thing's back.

It flinched, dropping whatever horrific spell it had been prepared to unleash, and that was all the time Michel needed.

His blow came in fast and clean, slashing through the creature's neck. Grand Duke Gaspard came down almost at the same time, his blow chopping from shoulder to crotch.

The foul demon possessing the corpse fled, defeated, and another ancient skeleton fell to the ground.

Celene, Gaspard, and Michel stood over the thing that had nearly slain them. It looked pitiful now, a bare skeleton clad in faded rags that had once been robes. Though it was hard to say, with so many bones cruelly shattered, the skeleton looked small. In life, Michel wondered if the elven mage would have even come up to his shoulder.

He offered a small prayer to the Maker. Whatever heathen gods this mage had worshipped in life, he had deserved better than for his bones to be possessed by demons.

Then he looked at Celene. She was looking at the skeleton as well, but with the calculated attention that meant she was thinking hard. She shifted her grip on her daggers, and her gaze stayed on the skeleton, not on Gaspard, even when the grand duke let out a chuckle that would normally have drawn her attention.

She didn't want to alert him.

Michel saw her think it. Saw the tiny shift of her weight that would let her blade slide so easily across Gaspard's throat, ending a war and putting her back on the throne with no cost except a broken truce.

No one would ever know, except for Michel. He would not even need to attack, just stand idly and say nothing while Celene took Gaspard by

surprise. Michel might disapprove, but Celene was hardly a chevalier, restricted by the same code of honor to which Michel and Gaspard held themselves.

But Michel *was* a chevalier.

“Gaspard,” Michel said as he stepped back, lowering his blade. “Is our truce concluded, or would you speak further?”

He pretended not to see the flash of frustration in Celene’s eyes.

* * *

Briala watched from atop the sarcophagus, next to Felassan, as Celene, Michel, and Gaspard stood over the bodies of the demon-mage and the revenants. Her bow was raised, an arrow ready in her free hand, ready for whatever came next.

As it turned out, what came next was talking.

Briala lowered her bow, grimacing at the stupidity of humans. “Maker’s blood. She should have killed him then and there.”

Felassan gave a tiny shrug. “Humans.”

Briala looked at the humans as they spoke. Gaspard stood stiff and formal, as though his battlefield honor could somehow erase the betrayal of attempting to usurp the throne in the first place. Celene had shifted her stance, a tiny step that made her look just a little smaller and more submissive. Before she became empress, she had used that stance to get the boys to do foolish things for her. Michel was practically dead on his feet, legs locked, holding himself up by force of will.

“It wouldn’t be a certainty,” she said. She had used most of her arrows in the battle before, and she hadn’t had the chance to retrieve any from the battlefield.

“True.” Felassan hopped down, and Briala followed. “This was but the first danger. There will certainly be more. Say what you will about the humans, they’re smart enough to burn their dead.”

Briala nodded. “So rather than kill each other here and then die at the hands of whatever else guards the eluvians, we ally with Gaspard, get to the

central chamber, and then decide matters there?”

“It makes sense.”

“Yes.” Briala looked at the humans again. Celene had lived too long behind her mask. Her tiny smile gave away that she was getting what she wanted. “But that isn’t why they’re doing it.”

“Probably not.” Felassan looked over at Gaspard’s allies. “Tell me what you saw of Mihris.”

Briala blinked at the change of subject, then looked over at the First of Clan Virnehn. She had recovered from Felassan’s magical attack, though she was still on her knees a dozen yards away, near the unconscious human mage. Her staff lay on the ground beside her. “Her staff glowed white before, but it’s red now.” She squinted. “And it *is* the same staff. Is that common?”

“No. Though I suppose she may have stolen some magical trinket from her now-dead clan.” Felassan chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip. “That *might* explain why Thelhen’s apprentice was suddenly tossing off such impressive spells.”

Which, Briala noted, Felassan had countered quite handily. “I’ve only seen you control the elements before now. I had no idea you could do that.”

“Really?” Felassan cocked his head. “I suppose we didn’t run into many mages during our time together. That’s about the only thing that spell is good for.” Felassan shook his head, smiling, but his eyes were far away. “When you live long enough, you have the time to study spells you might only need on rare occasions. Most of the humans are happy enough just to throw fire or lightning.”

Briala was about to reply when Mihris coughed and looked up at them.

“Michel,” she said.

Celene and Gaspard were at the far end of the room. This, then, was for her to handle.

At a dozen yards, Briala could put a shaft through the mage’s eye nine times out of ten, but they were among the sarcophagi, and a single roll

would put Mihris behind cover, with time to prepare a spell that could kill them all.

Briala lifted her bow, an arrow nocked and ready. “Celene and Gaspard called a momentary truce, Mihris. Reach for that staff, and I will consider you to be breaking it.”

Mihris glared at her. “I do not expect you to understand, flat-ear. My clan is dead because of Michel.”

“Yes,” Briala said without lowering her bow, “what would a *flat-eared city elf* know about chevaliers killing her loved ones?”

“How did Michel kill your clan?” Felassan asked. “The storm and lightning was mine. Not that I want your vengeance aimed at me, necessarily…”

“Imshael.” Mihris spat the name. “Michel freed Imshael, and then Imshael destroyed my clan.”

“Your clan imprisoned an ancient demon,” Felassan said. “You might want to aim that vengeance at Thelhen, for being such an idiot.”

Mihris smiled bitterly and continued as if Felassan had not spoken. “I only live because Imshael found Michel’s *choice* not to kill me amusing … and because the demon respected my *choice* to kill him in return.” She looked at Michel, and her fingers twitched toward the staff.

“You can try,” Briala said, “but I need him. You’ll have an arrow in your heart before you reach it.”

Felassan looked at Mihris with interest. “Still, though, you have a choice. You could hope to survive Briala’s shot, maybe use your spirit magic to drag a little more energy out of these corpses and heal yourself. Given the power you wielded earlier, you might live long enough to see Michel die before I kill you.”

Briala spared Felassan a glance. “Is there any particular reason you’re encouraging her?”

“Yes.” Felassan gestured politely with one hand and raised his staff in the other. “Mihris?”

She stared at him with absolute hatred, her eyes darting to the staff, to Michel, to Briala and the arrow that was already ready to fly.

“Briala, Felassan, hold!” Celene called from across the chamber.

“Mihris,” Gaspard added, “I have agreed to a truce. We travel with them as allies against whatever else this Maker-cursed crypt throws at us.”

“Once we reach the central chamber, we will settle this dispute with a fair fight,” Celene said. “The winner will control the eluvians.”

“You said I could *kill him*.” Mihris pointed at Michel.

“And now I’m telling you to wait,” Gaspard said, “or by my sworn oath as a chevalier, I will cut your head off and dump your body back with the rest of your clan.”

Mihris clenched and unclenched her jaw. “I should never have trusted you.” She picked up her staff, slowly and carefully, and slipped it back into her harness. “You *shemlen* break any deal except with each other.”

“Good girl,” Gaspard said. “Now tend to Lienne and Remache, if you please.”

Briala looked at Felassan, who shrugged.

They had the truce, as she had expected. And it made sense, as Felassan had noted.

But Briala did not entirely disagree with Mihris.

* * *

Celene lost track of time as they made their way through the paths between worlds.

The pace felt grueling, at least for the humans. Felassan, Briala, and Mihris always somehow pulled ahead without seeming to walk any faster than Celene or Michel, and they were always waiting in the ruins that lay on the far side of the eluvian, waiting for Celene’s ruby to guide the way and awaken the eluvian that would lead to the next path.

Remache had taken a wound in the fight against the dead warriors, and though Lienne healed it as best she could, he was still clearly pained by it. Lienne herself was still shaken from the blast that had knocked her

unconscious, and in addition, she seemed unaccustomed to any real exercise. They both struggled to stay with the group, glaring daggers at Celene when she offered to slow down.

Whenever they reached another eluvian and came into an ancient tomb for a few hours of precious rest and relief from the pain of the paths, Remache and Lienne retreated to talk to each other in quiet whispers, glaring at Celene and Gaspard in almost equal measure. In Remache's case, at least, the glare might have come from the fine new scar that graced his face, courtesy of Celene's dagger.

Regardless of the cause, Celene guessed that neither of them would yield graciously if Gaspard lost the duel with Michel. Either she or they would die before seeing the light of day again.

It was a relief to have simple enemies, Celene found. She needed no pretense with them, no concern for their feelings or second-guessing of their motivations. She would kill them before they killed her, and that would be that.

Gaspard, meanwhile, marched with military precision and made polite conversation as they walked the otherworldly paths.

"Amazing to see what the elves did," he noted, gesturing at the painful light of the path. "Messes with your eyes, though. Wonder how the elves put up with it."

"The elves see it differently." Celene did not precisely *want* to speak with him, but he was making an effort to be polite in honor of their truce. Besides, there was always the chance that he could let something slip in casual conversation.

There was the chance that *she* could let something slip in that conversation as well, but Celene was willing to risk it. As Gaspard himself had noted, he could never defeat her in a battle of words.

"Any idea why?" Gaspard asked. "The big eyes? Or some kind of spell?"

"Likely the latter," Celene said with a shrug.

“Fascinating. Your mage said we were moving faster than it seemed, too. Think about that. Faster than if we were riding, and with no one on the surface the wiser. Oh, what a military mind might make of that, as much as I’d hate trying to sleep down here.” He chuckled. “Ser Michel, where would you send your forces?”

Michel glanced at Celene cautiously, and she nodded. “First to Val Royeaux, much as you would, my lord.”

Gaspard raised an eyebrow. “Well, it makes sense for me. It’s a masterful strike at the heart of Celene’s power. Bit careful from your side, isn’t it?”

“I *am* the empress’s sworn protector, my lord,” Michel said politely. “And the true power of the eluvians is moving faster than a horse or a ship. We could afford to take a defensive first step, provided it was quick, to dispel any rumors and gather enough forces to launch assaults on your strongholds.”

“Ah, point taken,” said Gaspard, and looked over at Celene. “You chose well for your champion.”

Celene smiled. “And you might remember that they are *my* forces, though I agree with my champion’s assessment. Would you like to know where I would send them *second*?”

Duke Remache, pale and sweating, snorted. “As though you would tell us truthfully. This is a fool’s game.”

“Hardly, Remache,” Celene said with an elegant sideways glance that would have cut him dead at court. “This conversation distracts the mind most pleasantly from the discomfort of the paths. And besides, when we reach the chamber and the keystone, we will settle this. Whoever loses is unlikely to survive. I lose nothing by telling him my plans, which spring not from the noble tradition of the chevaliers, but from whatever trifling understanding I may have gained in my twenty years of ruling the largest empire in the known world.”

Gaspard grinned. “Well said, cousin. And where do you strike, then? My home in Verchiel, I imagine?”

Celene shook her head. “Lydes.”

As Remache sputtered in outrage, Gaspard threw back his head and laughed. “Maker’s breath, Celene, I’d forgotten how well you played the Game.”

“Destroying Verchiel leaves you with nothing to lose…”

“No, no, I see it now. So you destroy the homes of Remache and any other lords who took my side. Terrorize them, show them what happens to any who oppose the throne.” Gaspard nodded. “Instead of a bold hero fighting to avenge his home, I’m a danger to any lord who allies with me. I might as well be walking around with the plague.”

“I am pleased that you are able to appreciate the wisdom of Celene’s plan to destroy Lydes,” Remache said coldly. “A pity I cannot be so clearheaded with respect to the destruction of my city.”

“It’s a good plan, you must admit,” Gaspard chided. “And besides, Remache, I don’t plan to lose.”

“Even still,” Celene said, “that isn’t using the eluvians to their true potential. Look at them.” She gestured up ahead, where the elves were distant silhouettes in the twisting purple light. Even as she tried to look, the light turned her eyes away, and when she looked again, the elves were gone. “They move even faster than we do.”

Now Gaspard frowned. “An army of elves, Celene?”

“A force of some sort, at least,” Celene said. “Scouts, skirmishers, able to be anywhere in the empire quickly and unseen.” At Gaspard’s shocked look, she smiled. “Consider the idea my gift to you, should you survive to use it.”

“Majesty,” Michel said, “that seems too much power to be trusted to the elves. Perhaps one or two as a guide in a large force of men, but if they were united, grouped together, they would get ideas.”

“They already *are* grouped together, my champion.” Celene frowned. “And they had no shortage of ideas at Halamshiral.”

Gaspard snorted. “Please, Celene. When we put the elves in the slums, we don’t put them in there with silverite armor and warhorses and hope it

never occurs to them to cause trouble. This?" He stared at the runes glowing painfully bright on the path. "This is enough to tempt anyone. And you, cousin, think entirely too much of the elves."

"I suppose we shall see," Celene said with a smile.

Gaspard didn't smile in return. "You had to burn a good chunk of Halamshiral, and still you think them worth your trust. That Dalish clan consorted with demons to get access to these mirrors. The elves will never be happy, Celene. Not in our forests or our slums…" He gave her a hard look. "… or our beds. Not as long as Orlais is the empire of men."

Celene opened her mouth, ready to argue the point. The elves deserved the chance to show that they could be trusted, and when she gave them that chance, she knew they would be grateful. Ancient Tevinter had built its empire on the backs of slaves, and history had shown that such grudging and unwilling labor never produced the greatness that could be achieved by citizens who believed in their cause. Elves serving Celene out of love, passionate and loyal to her and what she represented, would give Orlais the strength it needed to weather the coming storm.

But in the end, it was pointless to argue—if Celene won later, Gaspard would be dead, and if she lost, she herself would die. No matter which way the battle ended, she doubted she would convince Gaspard that he was wrong.

She sighed, fell silent, and hurried to catch up with the elves up ahead.

* * *

For Briala, the next several days passed in a blur of magic.

When they were awake, they walked the paths. Briala, Felassan, and Mihris stayed ahead. No matter how careful they were, they always looked back to see that the humans had fallen behind.

Each time a path ended at another eluvian, they explored the half-collapsed ruins that lay beyond to ensure that they were alone. Then came a meager meal from Gaspard's rations and what little food Felassan had taken from the Dalish, and then, finally, it was time to rest.

And then Briala was with Celene again. They tumbled into each other's arms with time for little more than a quick embrace, and when they slept, Briala dreamed of great elven spires reaching to the heavens, of cities built on magic, where elves laughed and traded and fought and loved. When Felassan nudged her awake each morning, her mind was clear and alert, while beside her, Celene was groggy and winced as one who had drunk too much the night before.

It made Mihris laugh to see the *shemlen,* whose name in Elvish meant "the quick ones," move so slowly. Briala, who knew what it was like to lose family to violence, let the Dalish girl have her bitter joke.

And it was easy enough to ignore her and bask in the beauty of the paths, now that she was used to it, to listen to the subtle song that called to her with each step. It felt as though she were finally where she was supposed to be. The light, the sound, even the peculiar gray dimness of that little world that lay off the path between the eluvians, all of it felt like home in a way that Celene's family estate never had. Briala let it lull her into a pleasant waking meditation as they walked the shining roads.

Even the rooms that connected the eluvians were marvelous in their own way, though none were as large as the one where they had fought the corpses. They passed through chambers filled with urns and more sarcophagi, and even great bedchambers where the elves who had not died but instead gone to the eternal sleep of *uthenara* had lain for their long rest.

When they came to the first of these rooms, Felassan stopped and looked at the ancient corpse half-lying under satin sheets. To Briala, it looked no different from the ones they had fought on that first terrible day, but Felassan's face was twisted with grief.

"Unnecessary," he said quietly, and Briala, curious, came out of her reverie and looked.

The body lay in a resting position, with clean white bedding pulled up carefully over the chest, leaving only the head and shoulders exposed. It had not awakened to die, nor struggled. Though the skin was withered

down to worn leather pulled taut over the bones, nothing had picked those bones clean of flesh.

But there, at the throat, Briala saw a single thin cut, along with the tiniest trace of old bloodstains on the pillow.

“For mercy?” Briala asked. “A quick death, so that he would not starve with the servants?”

Mihris sneered. “Stupid flat-ear. Those who found the peace of *uthenara* needed no mortal sustenance. They could sleep for all eternity and never starve.”

“Almost, *da’len*,” Felassan said. “Most of those who entered *uthenara* could survive on a simple potion. Water, with honey and herbs added to keep the body alive. Servants would brush it across the lips of the dreamer at the full moon, and then smell the naked wrist of the dreamer at the new moon. If they smelled the perfumed scent of the herbs, it meant that the concoction had been drawn into the body, and they would keep feeding the dreamer. If the wrist was bare of scent, then it meant that the dreamer had learned to draw sustenance from the Fade itself, and would never need to be fed again. Those true dreamers were placed in beds of purest white, signifying the dreamer’s achievement of perfection.” He smiled and shook his head. “Or so the old songs say.”

Briala looked at the white satin sheets. “Revenge, then.”

“Such a waste.” Felassan shook his head. “This one could have helped.”

“How?” Briala asked. “Their empire was falling. You told me that those in *uthenara* could visit people in dreams. What would they say, beyond wishing us luck in the alienages?”

“You know nothing,” Mihris said. “From the Fade, the ancients could see our whole world. They could tell us where our enemies would be, and in what number. Where the Veil was thin, they could send spirits to do their bidding and help us.”

“They could kill their enemies as they slept!” Felassan’s face shone with excitement. “They could grant wishes to dreamers whose souls were pure!

Or they could lie there and do nothing except inspire overly romantic Dalish folktales." He smirked.

"We will never know what they could have done for us." Mihris spat on the floor. "Since some foolish servant cared more for revenge than for the good of the people."

Briala glanced over. "I'm sure you're better than that, Mihris." As Mihris looked at her, anger twisting the tattoos on her face, Briala smiled. "Though I know you blame Ser Michel for the death of your clan, I'm certain that since Empress Celene is the best hope for the elves, you will stay your hand against her champion."

Mihris clenched her fists, and Briala thought for a moment that fire glittered in her eyes. "You are gutter trash, flat-ear."

"And you have never *seen* the gutters where we fight to survive," Briala said without heat. "Your clan could have helped the elves in the cities, taken in *the strays*, as your Keeper said. Instead, you rode around in wagons and searched for gifts left by our ancestors. You summoned demons and brought your doom upon yourselves."

Mihris snarled and stalked to the far side of the room without reply.

"That was cold, *da'len*," Felassan said, looking after the mage.

"So was she." Briala sighed. "How many times did I pass you information, thinking I was working *with* them? And all the while, they cared only for themselves." She shook her head. "At least Gaspard is honest about it."

"And Celene does not care only for herself?"

"She cares for…" Briala looked at the body in the bed. "She cares for me. And she will help the elves to make me happy."

Felassan smiled. "Gaspard is not the only one who is honest."

"Celene has known nothing but power and luxury all her life. Little wonder she needs help to see the plight of those in need," Briala said, looking back at the eluvian they had come through. The humans still had yet to join them.

"You know, there's an old story about Fen'Harel."

“I’m shocked, *hahren.*”

“You wound me.” He smiled. “In the story, Fen’Harel was captured by the hunting goddess Andruil. He had angered her by hunting the halla without her blessing, and she tied him to a tree and declared that he would have to serve in her bed for a year and a day to pay her back. But as she made camp that night, the dark god Anaris found them, and Anaris swore that he would kill Fen’Harel for crimes against the Forgotten Ones. Andruil and Anaris decided that they would duel for the right to claim Fen’Harel.”

“And what happened?” Briala asked.

“What do you think, *da’len*?” Felassan smiled. “You have heard enough of my stories over the years.”

Briala thought for a moment. “Fen’Harel found a way to trick them both and escape.”

“He called out to Anaris during the fight and told him of a flaw in Andruil’s armor just above the hip,” Felassan said, nodding, “and Anaris stabbed Andruil in the side, and she fell. Then Fen’Harel told Anaris that he owed the Dread Wolf for the victory and ought to get his freedom. Anaris was so affronted by Fen’Harel’s audacity that he turned and shouted insults at the prisoner, and so he did not see Andruil, injured but alive, rise behind him and attack with her great bow.” He smiled again and looked at Briala. “Anaris fell with a golden arrow in his back, badly injured, and while both gods slumbered to heal their wounds, Fen’Harel chewed through his ropes and escaped. You *have* heard enough of my stories over the years, *da’len*.” His stare settled upon her, calm but unyielding. “Perhaps it is time you wrote your own.”

“I’m not a god.” Briala felt foolish even as she said it, and Felassan’s chuckle made her flush.

“That is for the stories to decide.” He broke off as Celene, Gaspard, and the rest of the humans finally stepped through the eluvian, looking exhausted and pained. “For now, go to your empress.”

* * *

Celene's head ached by the time Felassan called for a rest at what she assumed was the end of the day. The room they found themselves in was a small circular chamber with pallets arranged in a circle. In the middle of the room, a fire blazed cheerily in a great metal bowl that had no fuel Celene could see.

"I found food in a chest by the wall," Briala said, and Celene looked over to see her toasting what looked like a fresh piece of bread over the fire. "Felassan said that it was safe, preserved by magic somehow."

"I'll take it over more trail rations." Gaspard dumped his gear and began unbuckling his armor. It was still scratched and dented from their fight.

"What was this chamber?" Celene asked, sitting down by the fire. She was not cold, but despite its magical origin, the natural firelight was blissfully welcome to her eyes after so much time when the only light sources were the painful glare of the path or the otherworldly glow of the mages' staffs. "And to cook over that fire … Are we violating any customs of the ancient elves?"

"None that matter," Felassan said cheerfully.

"In this chamber, the *somniari* performed the great rituals," Mihris said, glaring at Briala and Felassan. "Sacred herbs were thrown into the eternal fire, and the smoke guided the elven dreamers into the Fade."

"That's a lovely story, Mihris." Felassan smiled. "It may also have been a place where they cooked. Or just as likely, a place for the dreamers to be protected while they slept, rather than trusting the servants not to kill them in their beds."

"Prudent," Gaspard said, pulling off his breastplate with a grunt.

Celene thought of her magical teapot. She had always thought of it as a simple bit of elegance, a privilege of her position. After walking through crypt after crypt and finding so many ancient elven mysteries, Celene could understand the peasants who would be fearful of such a trinket. She herself would not trust in magic so easily once she was back on the throne.

Nevertheless, she stretched out her hands toward the fire, taking in the warmth.

Then Briala was beside her. “What are you thinking?”

Celene shifted to lean against Briala. They both smelled of armor that had seen too much battle, of sweat and blood and cookfire smoke and clothes that had been left out in the rain. She had never imagined she could find Briala beautiful even so, but after a long day’s journey, she was ready to curl up with her and just forget everything.

“I am thinking about this wondrous place,” she said. “Though I do not see it with your eyes, I can still see so many possibilities.” She glanced over at Briala, smiling. “After we reclaim Orlais, of course.”

“Of course,” Duke Remache said, glaring at them both. He was working on his armor, like Gaspard. Michel was doing the same, hammering as he did each night on the dents that remained from Mihris’s deadly spell.

Celene ignored the men and turned back to Briala. “Imagine what we could do, Bria. Imagine nobles making the journey to Val Royeaux in days instead of weeks or months. How many policies have been limited because my commands could only travel at the speed of a messenger’s horse?”

“Like letting the elves out of the slums?” Briala asked, looking at the crackling flames.

“Oh, so much bigger than that.” Celene could see it in her mind’s eye. “Trade, Bria. Collecting wisdom at the university. If we could move the eluvians safely, we could put one in every city, and Val Royeaux would never be more than a short walk away from anywhere in the empire.”

Briala chuckled, but Celene knew it was forced from the way she took a tiny breath in before the laugh. It was deliberate, not spontaneous, and Briala’s beautiful big eyes did not tighten with laugh lines as they should have. The ring on Celene’s finger, the gift from Lady Mantillon that helped her see an enemy’s weaknesses in a fight, sharpened her wits as well, letting her see details she might otherwise miss. “I confess,” Briala said, “I can see little beyond the liberty of my people.”

“Oh, your empress has plans for your people.” Gaspard didn’t look up from tightening the strap on his greave. “Moving them out of the slums and down here into the tunnels as her own little spy network.”

Celene sniffed. “After a lifetime in our slums, the elves of Orlais might enjoy seeing their ancient history, as our elven companions have. Given how pleasant it seems for the elves, I imagine such an arrangement could benefit everyone.” She looked across the room where Mihris and Felassan were examining old runes on the wall, with a bored Lienne standing beside them.

“Well, you would, now, wouldn’t you, Your Radiance?” Remache asked, looking at Briala.

“Taking the elves out of the slums only to make them her personal assassins.” Gaspard smiled and shook his head. “That will bring a few of the nobles over to my side, I imagine.”

“As you will be resting in the arms of the Maker by then, it should concern you not at all,” Celene said dryly, and Gaspard laughed and reached out for the bread.

Briala passed over the piece she had been toasting. “If Her Imperial Majesty has the love and support of every elf in every city in the empire, the nobles will not dare move against her.” She smiled at Gaspard. “We may be mere insects, Grand Duke, but so are wasps. A wise man avoids poking their nest.”

Gaspard took the bread. “Of course he does. A wise man gets rid of wasps with smoke. Or fire.” He took a big crunching bite of the bread, and nodded. “This is good.”

“You think I have forgotten Halamshiral,” Briala said, her voice tight and angry, “that you might divide me from Celene with a reminder? I remember that you *caused* Halamshiral’s burning.”

“Empress Celene would not have attacked the city had you not forced her,” Michel said, looking up from his work to meet Gaspard’s stare.

“True. But that’s not what Briala said in that wagon outside the city,” Gaspard said, and took another bite of the bread. “As I recall, she even knew what I was going to do, and failed to warn Celene.”

“I would hardly have listened,” Celene said, even as she glanced at Briala in surprise. “All that matters is that the elves will live better lives

when we are done here."

"Better lives." Remache scowled. "You make deals with gutter trash."

"Thing is," Gaspard said to Celene, ignoring Remache, "most elves? Not the Dalish, not your handmaid, but most of them? They don't care about living in the alienages … or in the slums, in Halamshiral. They don't care about what a grand duke or an empress call liberty. They care about having a roof over their heads and food on the table. When you make your bold proclamation, the nobles will twist and turn and find a way to forget about the elves."

"Then we will remind them." Briala looked at Gaspard, and then at Celene.

Celene took her hand without hesitation. "I will do right for your people, Bria. I swear it."

Briala's hand tightened in hers, and Gaspard and Remache turned away uncomfortably as Celene leaned against her more closely. Michel went back to his armor, appearing not to notice.

In the firelight, Celene could see starving elves and rioting common folk, angry nobles sending chevaliers in too quickly for even her to stop them. She could see the imperial soldiers coming to burn the homes of the merchants who protested their elven competition, the elves turning to banditry and rebellion when their first taste of freedom left them wanting more too quickly.

She could see her empire burning. The fire was set already. All she could hope to control was who was consumed in the blaze.

16

It had been four nights, by Ser Michel’s count. Four nights of eating the dried meat Gaspard produced or the tough bread Felassan had taken from the Dalish camp. Four nights of sleeping on hard stone after walking all day in armor that was still not fully repaired after the damage Mihris had caused. Gaspard had ordered her to heal Michel’s injuries, and her touch had burned icy cold as she had done it, staring at Michel with blazing hatred.

Four nights of watching stony-eyed as his empress shared a blanket with Briala.

“Odd to see that empresses share beds just like everyone, isn’t it?” came the quiet question that night, and Michel turned to see Gaspard sitting a few paces away. He was working carefully to smooth over a small tear in his breastplate, at least as much as was possible with only field tools. Unlike the dents in Michel’s armor, the tear could actually catch a blade if it wasn’t fixed.

Michel had been sharpening his blade, and he turned back to his work. “A little, my lord.”

“Maker, Michel, you don’t have feelings for her yourself?” Gaspard asked with a soft laugh.

“No.” Michel chuckled as well. “Though I cherish our empress, I do not think of her that way. I heard a few too many tales in my youth of

chevaliers doomed by tragic love, dying from mistakes committed in the heat of jealousy or passion."

"I'd rather go at the hands of the cursed darkspawn." Gaspard scoured the long scratch on his breastplate. "Let me know if you need polishing oil."

"Thank you, my lord." Michel traced the length of his blade, found a nick, and went to work. Back in Val Royeaux, he would have thrown out a blade with such an imperfection, or at most asked the weaponsmith to reforge it. Here in the halls of the elven dead, he did not have such a luxury. After a minute of work, he added, "I can hardly judge. I have shared my bed with the occasional peasant girl. Why should the empress be any different?"

"Granted." Gaspard grunted, putting all his weight into buffing the armor, then looked at it critically. "If that's all it is."

The nick in the blade was going to catch the first time Michel locked blades with anything solid. Grimacing, Michel pulled out the whetstone. Silverite was hard enough that it was difficult to sharpen once it lost its incredible edge, and if done incorrectly, it could ruin the blade. "And am I supposed to admit my misgivings, my lord, and turn myself over to your cause?"

"I'd kill you here and now if you did," Gaspard said without hesitation. "We are chevaliers, sworn to honor and duty. And you have sworn yourself as her champion."

"You had little enough concern for honor when you started rumors against her."

"I did what the empire needed." Gaspard ran a finger down his breastplate, frowning. "I fought to win. What do they say at the Academie? Honor does not preclude—"

"—tactics," Michel said, finishing the old lesson, "and glory is not won through foolishness. Yes, my lord."

"Celene has always been a master of the Game. Maker's breath, that's how she ended up on that throne in the first place. I played only within the limitations of the rules she set out." Gaspard sighed. "Truth be told, my

greatest regret was using that bard against you. You know, I had her try to find anything she could to smear your name."

The memory of Melcendre taunting Michel in the warehouse chilled his blood. But he had watched the Game for long enough to know that if he asked what Gaspard knew, he would be giving away that fear. He shrugged instead. "As you said, my lord, you played the Game. It is based upon rumor and innuendo. And in this regard, I am fortunate to have led such a dull life."

"Even so, Ser Michel, it was unworthy of one chevalier to another, and you have my apology." Gaspard smiled. "When we find this chamber, our truce will end, and we will do our best to kill each other upon the field of battle. You know it, and I know it, but we will fight with honor, unencumbered by the Game, by gossip or lies. As two men who know themselves and wear that knowledge proudly for all the world to see."

Gaspard didn't know. Michel had been certain that the grand duke would have used the information earlier, before his attack at Halamshiral, but some part of him had always wondered, waiting for Gaspard to strike.

He remembered the immediate pounding of his blood, the hot rush of strength that demanded Melcendre's death when she threatened him with what she knew.

A tiny tension at the base of his skull, there for so long that he had forgotten it was even there, relaxed with a cool wash of relief across his spirit. He was free. He could live and die as Ser Michel de Chevin.

"Yes, my lord," he said, and returned to polishing out the imperfections in his weapon.

The next day, after walking one more Maker-damned path, they walked through the eluvian and stepped out into a great circular hall that was larger than anything they had seen before.

It was lit by great golden braziers that burned with magical fire, like the small flame Briala had used to toast bread last night. All around the wall, enormous support columns had been carved into the shapes of elves in armor or holding staffs. They flanked dozens of eluvians, and above the

points of the great mirrors, enormous monstrous shapes had been carved into the ceiling as well. Michel saw demons, dragons, and things for which he had no name.

The floor of the great hall had been carved into a gently sloping bowl shape. Along the upper slopes, fine marble benches looked down onto the interior. Below, runes had been traced into the floor in a pattern Michel could not understand, twisting spidery shapes overlapping each other, some looking like stylized creatures, others patterns that could have been fire or lightning, and still others simple geometric forms that twisted in directions that made no sense. They reminded him of the runes from the path, but they did not burn with the same brilliant light, and something in the shape was different, though he could not say what.

In the middle of the hall, in the center of the great circle of runes, a great stone pedestal stood, its surface bare except for one spot in the middle, shaped precisely like the ruby that Celene had been given by the demon Imshael. Until that moment, Michel had half wondered if the demon had just sent them here to die.

“Impressive,” Gaspard said. His voice echoed through the chamber, bouncing off the walls. “Knock the points off the ears on those columns, and it wouldn’t be out of place in Val Royeaux.”

“This was no burial chamber,” Briala said, and Michel noted with a little tingle of worry that *her* voice didn’t echo. “Felassan, what was this? The funeral hall?”

The elves had all gotten to the room well before Michel and the others, and Briala and Mihris looked awed by the extravagance. Felassan alone looked unimpressed.

“In part,” he said. “But the faithful also would come here in supplication.”

“To what? Your heathen gods?” Remache asked, the scar on his cheek twisting as he sneered.

“Our elders, who had entered *uthenara*.” If Felassan was offended by Remache’s interruption, he did not show it. “Supplicants would walk the

labyrinth," he said, gesturing at the twisting mass of runes, "and the songs say that if they were worthy, they would find the answers they sought in their dreams that night."

"Walk the…" Remache stared at the runes encircling the pedestal. "Is there some *pattern* to that?"

"Oh, you cannot see it?" Felassan asked, and smiled. "Perhaps you are unworthy."

Remache put his hand to his sword, then stopped at Gaspard's curt gesture.

"I take it you can see the path through that mess?" At Felassan's nod, Gaspard turned to Celene. "Then it would seem, cousin, that our truce is nearing its end." He stepped away from her, and though he did not draw his blade yet, his stance was ready for a fight. "We have the key to awakening the eluvians in our grasp. If I win, my elf walks me through. If you win, one of yours does. The only question I see is how you wish to settle this. Do we unleash more magic and risk waking up another Maker-cursed demon trying to kill each other, or do your champion and mine fight like men?"

Michel placed himself between Celene and Gaspard, and without looking back over his shoulder, said, "Majesty?" Mihris had already stepped to Gaspard's side, staring at Michel with eager anticipation, while Briala was stepping out to a position that would give her a clean shot at Lienne or Mihris.

Remache looked from Celene to Gaspard, eyes narrowed in thought, and Michel noted it and reminded himself that when it came to blows, he would kill Remache as quickly as he could. The lord had skill with a blade and no chevalier's code to restrain him, and he would doubtlessly wait for the battle to start, then come in and attack by surprise where he could do the most damage.

Before Celene could say anything, though, Lienne interjected.

"No. No, we do *not* have the eluvians. We have *nothing*. Something awakens, something old and angry."

Gaspard spared her a look. "Lienne, if you have something to say—"

“I sense magic bound to service. I can *feel* it, my lord. It is…” Lienne’s eyes were wide, and she looked around as if searching. Then she frowned. “It is all around us. Or…” She looked up.

With a great roar of crashing stone, the ceiling came down upon them.

* * *

As soon as Briala heard the roaring noise, she was moving, diving without pause under the nearest of the marble benches. She heard cries of pain as stone slammed down upon those who hadn’t moved fast enough.

Even as Briala tucked herself under the bench, she was listening.

The stone crashed down, a rumble that shook her belly and jolted her through the ground.

But it wasn’t a cave-in, she realized. Cave-ins didn’t restrict themselves to certain areas.

And they didn’t walk.

She rolled out, bringing her bow up, and saw what looked like a great stone column fallen from the fantastical creatures carved into the ceiling. Only as it lifted itself from a crushed marble bench did her eyes notice the great claws at the base of the column and, with a wrench of perspective, transform it into a stone-armored leg taller than she was.

The creature was massive but slender for its great size, a narrow body perched on five long legs that were barbed and segmented like an insect’s. A tiny torso sprouted two clawed arms that were no longer than a man’s, and ended in an eyeless head whose stone-fanged maw hung open as the creature hissed and scented the air.

Briala took all this in in an instant as she dove away and launched an arrow into the creature’s chest, hoping that the smaller area would be weaker. The arrow shattered on the stone hide.

Faster than should have been possible for something so huge, the thing swung her way, and a great armored leg smashed down, crushing the marble stones as Briala dove away. “Felassan, what is it?”

“Varterral!” he called back, even as Briala saw Remache and Michel charge the creature. “Very bad! Very very bad!”

Felassan wasn’t attacking yet. Perhaps he had a reason, or perhaps he knew that the thing was too strong. As the armored leg smashed down near Briala again, she leaped to safety, spun, and shot an arrow at the nearest leg, aiming for the joints. Again, the shot glanced harmlessly off the stone armor. Michel and Remache hacked at other legs on the far side of its body with little success.

The varterral smashed its legs into the ground, and the stone heaved beneath Briala’s feet. Michel and Remache flew back, landing with a crash of metal, and Mihris, her face deathly pale behind her curving tattoos, stepped forward, her staff raised. Gaspard, shaking his head, was beside her, and Lienne stood behind him, her staff glowing with magic that hummed around Gaspard as well.

“Wait!” Felassan shouted. Briala risked a quick look and saw that he had climbed onto a bench. “Get to high ground and stay your hand!”

Gaspard looked at him in shock. “Are you *serious*?”

“Now!” The varterral hissed and snapped its jaws in Gaspard’s direction, and a spray of acid sizzled through the air. Gaspard’s shield snapped up and caught the deadly spray, and the grand duke hopped nimbly onto a bench, then held out a hand and helped Lienne up. His shield smoked and sputtered where the acid had landed.

Briala rolled backward to put some ground between her and the creature and sprang back onto a bench. Off to the side, Celene was doing the same, and Briala saw Michel and Remache clamber up as well.

For a moment, nobody moved. The varterral twisted in place, opening its monstrous maw even wider as it scented the air. It turned on its five long legs, surprisingly nimble, and scratched at the ground. It seemed confused, though Briala could only guess at its emotions given the varterral’s monstrous eyeless face.

Of course.

“It cannot see,” she whispered.

“Correct, *da’len.”* Felassan’s voice was just as quiet. “It feels our movements through the ground, like a snake, and it tastes the guilt of those who dishonor this place. This one was meant to defend against humans intruding in the sacred place of the eluvians. It should only fight elves to defend itself.”

“Very useful,” Remache called over, “but not all of us are elves!” At his words, the varterral bunched, then leaped impossibly high and fast, coming down and crushing stone beneath its claws as it landed just a few paces from Remache. The lord paled and went silent and still as the great beast hissed quietly, moving back and forth, searching for him.

“It tried to kill Briala.” Gaspard didn’t say it as though it were an accusation. Briala could see the grand duke’s eyes narrowed in concentration.

“She attacked it. If she had acted peacefully, it might have ignored her.”

Gaspard nodded, still thinking. “So it smells if you’re an elf, doesn’t attack them.”

“Well, *this* one does. Fen’Harel knows what the other ones do.”

The varterral was still searching as Remache, still frozen on the bench, looked to the rest of them desperately. With an angry hiss, the beast smashed a great claw into the ground, and Remache stumbled and flailed to keep his balance.

“Michel, *Wolves Take the Bear*,” Gaspard called, and Michel nodded. To the rest, Gaspard called loudly, “Everyone, harass and withdraw! Elves, keep it off us while we work!” The varterral turned away from Remache at Gaspard’s words, and the grand duke grinned. “That’s right, you big beast! Come and get me!”

The varterral leaped again, and its great long legs ripped chunks of stone from the ground as it crushed the bench where Gaspard had stood. He had leaped clear, and even as he landed, Michel was raining blows onto the varterral’s back leg.

Briala fired, trying for the head this time, and caught the beast on the shoulder instead. It roared and turned toward her, then hissed in pain as a

freezing wave of cold washed over it. Mihris, her staff glowing white again, grimaced and sent another wave of cold into the varterral's leg, frosting it over in a thin layer of ice. As the beast turned to Mihris, a boulder sailed across the room and smashed into the weakened leg.

The varterral screamed in pain, and its injured leg hung limp as it spun on Felassan. Briala's teacher had no time to move. Rock from the floor slid up to cover his body as the varterral struck, and when it connected, the stone shattered. Felassan hit the ground hard and didn't move.

The varterral paused over Felassan's body, one barbed leg raised for a killing blow, but paused as Gaspard shouted, "How's the leg, beast?" and chopped into the thing's injured limb with a blow that cracked the stone armor and sent ichor hissing out. "Looks like it stings!" Gaspard seemed to glow with power, and every blow struck harder than any man could have swung. Behind him, Lienne had her staff raised, staring at Gaspard with fierce concentration as her magic gave Gaspard strength.

Briala saw the varterral turn on Gaspard, only to have Remache and Michel set upon it from behind. As it turned to Remache and raised a clawed leg to strike, Briala caught a glimpse of its unarmored underbelly. Without hesitation, she fired off another shot.

Briala's arrow sank into the varterral's underside near one of the leg joints, and she saw ichor spray. The beast screamed again. "Beneath it!" she yelled. "Get beneath it!"

She realized even as the thing turned toward her how suicidal that sounded, but then she was leaping away as stone shattered where she had been standing, and a hiss of acid sizzled across the ground behind her as the thing spat out its anger.

Then Celene dove past Briala and somersaulted beneath the varterral.

Briala was still running, the beast snapping at her in fury, but from the corner of her eye, she saw Celene come out of her roll, daggers flashing and trailing flame. She leaped and stabbed with lightning-fast precision, reaching up to catch the beast's underbelly. Whether Lady Mantillon's ring guided Celene's hand, Briala couldn't tell, but the varterral shrieked in pain.

Celene rolled free as the beast brought its weight crashing down, and came up clear not far from Remache, daggers raised. The varterral turned to her, its eyeless face contorted in a fury of fangs and acid, and behind it, Gaspard brought his blade down again on its injured leg.

Briala saw how the rhythm would work. Remache, Michel, and Gaspard were spaced evenly around the beast. Celene would attack from underneath, and Briala and Mihris would strike from afar, while Lienne helped as best she could.

Dangerous, frantic, the kind of battle not even Michel's vaunted chevaliers could prepare for, but Briala could see it working.

The varterral started to turn, just as Briala had predicted.

Then she watched in horror as Duke Remache smashed his shield into Celene's back.

"For Lydes," he said calmly as Celene fell forward and slammed hard into the varterral's leg.

"Remache! Damn it, man!" Gaspard shouted, still hacking wildly at the beast from behind, but given such easy prey that had just hurt it so badly, the varterral ignored him. It leaned down, its smaller, human-sized arms reaching for Celene.

Screaming, Briala fired an arrow, then another. They glanced off harmlessly, and the varterral's claws closed.

Upon Ser Michel.

Shoving Celene out of the way, Michel barreled into the grasping claws, slashing desperately at the creature's wrist. The blows glanced off the varterral's rocky hide, and the beast caught Michel in its grip and effortlessly lifted the chevalier from the ground.

Its fanged muzzle gaped open wide, and as Michel bellowed, the varterral brought him towards its great jaws.

Then it paused, as a cry from below sounded. "Fight, my champion!"

Empress Celene of Orlais dove between the legs of the varterral, then leaped up, kicked off the inside of the beast's knee, and sank her daggers into the underside of the beast again.

Briala believed in Celene, had loved her since they were children, and had never dreamed she would see her empress risk her own life for one who served her.

With a screech of pain, the varterral tossed Michel to the ground. He landed with a crash, groaning but alive, and Celene rolled out and away as the beast crashed down to the ground, trying to crush her. Her face was flushed but exultant, and then, with a panicked look, she dove back away from Duke Remache, who was coming at her with desperate slashes.

“Remache! Where is your honor, man?” Gaspard was still hacking at the varterral’s back leg with Lienne magically bolstering him. The varterral turned on him but flinched as a blast of cold sprayed across its flank.

“Stupid beast. You had him in your grasp.” Mihris flung another blast of cold, then leaped nimbly to another bench as the varterral crushed the one where she had stood.

The attack left the varterral vulnerable from where Briala stood, and she skipped an arrow off the ground and up into the varterral’s unarmored belly. It roared again, and again Briala dove away as the ground behind her shattered.

The varterral had reduced most of the benches nearby to rubble. Briala slid behind the crumbled remains of one of them, then rolled as chunks of stone sprayed out all around her. Coming back to her feet, she saw a great stone-armored leg lashing out and spun with the blow. The impact still crushed the breath from her lungs, and for a moment she was flying, then skidding across the rough broken stone until the savage impact of a marble bench halted her progress. Dazed, fighting to get air back into her lungs, she could only lie there and watch for a moment.

She thought the varterral would come after her, but a spray of ice from Mihris across its fanged muzzle caught its attention, and the great beast turned to the elven healer, hissing in anger.

Off to one side, Remache had circled and was trying to drive Celene back toward the varterral. He raised his sword to force her back further.

Grand Duke Gaspard stepped between Celene and Remache and batted Remache's blow aside with his shield.

"I appreciate your loyalty, Remache," Gaspard said sadly, and slammed a mailed fist into the duke's helmet.

"But this…" He cast his shield aside and, with his newly freed arm, wrenched Remache's visor open.

"… is not…" He shoved his blade through the visor slot, and Briala saw the tip punch through the back of Remache's helmet.

"… acceptable." As Remache sank to his knees, Gaspard kicked the man's body hard and wrenched his blade free. "Celene, I apologize for my man's dishonorable conduct."

Briala didn't hear whatever reply Celene made, as her breath had finally returned, and she forced herself to her knees, then back to her feet. Her bow was nearby, and she grabbed it and nocked an arrow. Her hands were shaking. The battle had gone for too long, and the blow had taken the fight out of her.

She turned to the varterral just in time to see Mihris fall, swatted to the ground with a backhanded blow that sent the elven healer skidding across the rubble-strewn floor.

Michel was finally up again, slow but moving, with acid scoring his armor where the varterral's venom had dripped. He bellowed and laid into the beast with crisp, efficient strikes. There was no fury behind them, though. Briala wasn't the only one who had been shaken by the battle.

Then Gaspard was before her, heedless of the varterral slashing at Michel. Gaspard had recovered his shield, but he was removing one mailed gauntlet for reasons Briala didn't understand until she saw the ring on his finger.

"I'll want this back," Gaspard said bluntly as he slid it off and tossed it her way. She caught it by reflex.

Though larger, sized for a man's fingers, it was the same intricate puzzle shape as the ring Briala wore, given to her by Lady Mantillon.

“Where did you get this?” Briala asked, as Celene slashed at the varterral’s legs and drew its attention away from Michel.

“Lady Mantillon,” he said, raising an eyebrow at her question. “After the first time I impressed her in the Game.”

The varterral was there, roaring in anger, crushing stone, but for a moment, all Briala could see was a reading room with blood on the floor. Celene pulling her from her hiding spot. A new ring on Celene’s finger.

“Hey!” Gaspard’s hands were on her shoulders, clapping her roughly. “Pull yourself together. Your arrows and Celene’s daggers have hurt that thing more than our blades.” He turned to Celene and Michel and raised his voice. “Michel, we guard the elf!” Michel flinched, then nodded. “Briala sinks arrows into that thing’s gut until it dies. Celene, be ready to go beneath it again if you get the chance. Lienne?” He turned to his mage, who stood on the bench where she’d been the whole time, using her magic to help Gaspard. “Forget about me. Hex the bastard blind.”

Lienne smiled, even as the varterral turned to Gaspard. “Spirit born of wood and stone and air, you were created to protect those now dead. You have failed in your duty.” She raised her hand, and her staff flared with pale light. *“Fail again.”*

The varterral stumbled, a pale and uncertain light flickering around it for a moment, and Briala slid Gaspard’s ring onto her finger. The air around her went still, and as she raised her bow she could feel the rightness of her draw. She knew even before firing how the varterral would move, how lifting its leg would expose a tiny bit of its unprotected underbelly.

Her shot flashed past the beast’s upraised claw and sank into unarmored flesh.

It roared and turned toward her, but Michel and Gaspard were there, shields raised against its great clawed legs, and though its strength still battered them back, the blows glanced off where before they would have connected. Michel and Gaspard stumbled but recovered, their shields up as the varterral sprayed acid at them in its rage.

Briala fired again, this time into its open maw, and the great beast bucked and shrieked, pounding the ground in its fury. Chunks of stone sprayed everywhere, and Gaspard and Michel fell to their knees. In a flash, the varterral was past them and over Briala, raising two legs to spear her where she stood.

Gaspard's ring still worked its magic upon Briala. She saw the varterral, still uncertain, determined to crush the life from her. She saw its back legs, carrying its weight while its front legs were lifted, unguarded and vulnerable for Celene to hamstring the beast and send it falling back before it could strike Briala. She saw Celene, calculating and ready, holding her daggers.

So Briala fired another shot, sending an arrow straight up between the varterral's upraised legs into the unarmored belly.

The varterral screamed again.

Celene hesitated, then held her place.

The varterral's legs smashed down, and too late, Briala dove to the side. Again she was slammed with crushing force, but this time she felt the tearing pain as the blow slammed her to the ground, and her body was burning even as she fought to breathe, stars dancing across her eyes as she tried to move, to fight, to do anything.

Celene hadn't moved. She had risked her life for Michel, and had hesitated for her.

Briala coughed, forced her head up, and saw, through a haze of red, the varterral standing over her.

And *then* Celene moved in, her daggers flashing as she stabbed up into the varterral's belly again and again. The varterral cried out and fell forward, and Briala tried to move, but her body flared with a pain that lanced through her side, and she was helpless as the crushing weight came down on top of her.

The last thing she saw was Celene diving away to safety.

It seemed like only an instant, but Briala realized almost immediately that she had to have blacked out. She lay where she had fallen, and the great

body of the varterral was beside her. Michel and Gaspard stood beside it, panting, and she realized that they must have pushed it off of her.

Warmth spread across her torso, and she looked down to see Lienne pressing her hands to Briala's stomach. "The next time a great beast rises above you," she said, smiling calmly, "I suggest you *move*."

"I…" Briala stopped, realizing that she didn't know what to say. She had been certain Celene would see the same opening and move in to hamstring the beast. After all, Celene wore the same type of ring as Briala, the ring that showed openings and opportunities.

The ring Celene had gotten from Lady Mantillon.

"Mihris and Felassan?" she asked Lienne instead.

"Both fine," Gaspard said. "No serious harm done. You, meanwhile, will need to find a good armorer."

Briala got to her feet, taking the hand Lienne offered. She ached from the impact on the hard stone floor, and she felt the still-tight pain from the wound Lienne had healed on her torso. Her armor hung oddly, and when she looked down, she realized what Gaspard had meant. The chest of her fine blue drakeskin armor had been shredded, ripped right down the middle by the varterral's barbed claws.

Whatever protection the armor had afforded, it could not have suffered that much damage and stopped enough to save her. She turned to Lienne. "Thank you."

The young woman smiled again. "We all do as we can with our gifts."

"Indeed." Briala turned to Michel. "And you are unharmed as well?"

Michel nodded. "Though it is a dark day when the empress's champion must look to the empress to save him."

"Yes." Briala swallowed. She had given herself for him.

Gaspard chuckled. "Three mages, two chevaliers, and more, and we barely brought that thing down. Maybe you were right, Celene. When I control these eluvians, I might have to use elves. Least the Maker-cursed thing won't go after them." He glanced at Briala, then added, "Not as much, anyway."

“It matters little now,” Felassan said as he came around the varterral’s body, limping slightly. He seemed more interested in it than in them. “This one is dead. Well, dead-ish. They’re a lot like golems.”

“Pity,” Gaspard said. “A good guardian is hard to find. Almost impossible to be certain of anyone’s loyalty these days.” He glanced at the fallen form of Remache and sighed.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to kill nobles,” Briala said, and Gaspard ducked his head.

“He was mine,” the grand duke said, “and he broke our truce to strike an ally from behind in the heat of battle. His death wasn’t just allowed. It was demanded.” He seemed genuinely sad. “He would have been an immeasurable help in the court. I should never have brought him here, where he did not understand the rules.”

Briala was not certain she understood the rules herself right then.

She looked at Celene, who sat on one of the few marble benches that hadn’t been reduced to rubble by the varterral’s fury. Celene was breathing hard, but she was uninjured as far as Briala could tell, her face still flushed from the exertion of battle. It gave her a rosy countenance Briala had almost never seen during their days in Val Royeaux, when Celene was always pale and masked.

It reminded her of those slow lazy moments after they made love, when anything seemed possible, and Briala could believe that promises would be kept.

Celene smiled as she caught Briala’s look. Her eyes widened at the state of Briala’s armor, but she still seemed genuinely happy that Briala had survived.

“And now,” Gaspard said, before Briala could think of what to do, “regrettably, it is time for us to determine who controls the eluvians, Celene … and which of us remains down here with the dead.”

17

Though her heart hammered in her chest, Celene stood and presented Gaspard with icy calm. “Do you intend to attack now, with my champion injured, while your own healers keep you in perfect condition?”

Gaspard laughed, a deep guffaw that echoed off the still-beautiful walls of the great hall. “Celene, if I’d intended to do that, I wouldn’t have had Lienne heal your elf. Maker’s breath, I could’ve just *not pushed so hard*, and she’d have died pinned under this damned thing.” He gestured at the dead varterral.

Celene’s breath caught. When the great thing had struck, her heart had stopped for a moment. She had done all she could, short of likely getting herself killed trying to distract the beast, and she would never forget watching helplessly as the woman she loved vanished beneath the monster’s claws. “So you plan no treachery, beyond that you have already undertaken?”

Gaspard sighed and shook his head. “It would be easier. And nobody up on the surface would know.” Then he smiled. “But I’d know. And I swore an oath. So we will settle this with honor, Celene.”

“You against my champion?” Celene asked. “And no magic, beyond that which both of you carry yourselves?” She looked over at Lienne for emphasis.

Formal duels in Orlais could have rules for what equipment was carried, what magic was allowed, and even what combat style was used. Given the

lack of dueling blades in this pit beneath the earth, the best Celene could hope for was to keep Lienne from using her magic to strengthen Gaspard and hex Michel.

“Agreed.” Gaspard nodded. “And if I win, you even have my oath that no harm comes to your elves.”

Celene saw Briala give him a brittle smile, and she felt the rush of the same anger that must have taken her love. “If you win, I will die, and I doubt you consider your oaths binding to those you call *knife-ears*.”

Gaspard shrugged. “Take it as you like, Celene. Ser Michel, if you need treatment from Lienne, you are welcome to it.” He looked over at the dead varterral and grimaced. “After nearly being eaten by that monstrosity, I’d be surprised if you didn’t.”

“Thank you,” Michel said. “I would appreciate that.”

“And I for one will take a few moments to scour some of that thing’s cursed acid from my shield and armor.” Gaspard nodded to Michel, then withdrew some distance away, to another spot with a few undamaged benches. Mihris went with him, still shaking her head and stepping gingerly. Lienne stayed, laying her glowing hands upon Michel for a few moments, and then followed.

When neither Gaspard nor those loyal to him were within earshot, Celene sank back onto the bench. She would have traded half her empire for a bed at that moment. “And so it all comes to one fight,” she murmured.

The Game. All of her work. Years of keeping different factions loyal and trying to drag the greatest empire in Thedas into an age of civility, and now everything hung upon the outcome of one fight in the depths of an elven tomb.

“Michel,” she said gently, and he came over. Briala and Felassan approached as well, but hung back, understanding that this moment was for her and her champion.

“Your Imperial Majesty.” He bowed.

She steadied herself. “Can you defeat him?”

Michel drew himself straight. “He is a chevalier, Empress. He is well trained, well equipped, and prepared to fight to the death.” He took a breath. “But I can, and will, defeat him.”

Celene let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, and then smiled. “And would you tell me if you couldn’t, Michel?”

“Probably not, Majesty.” He smiled. “But I will do my best to prove myself a man of my word.”

“You always are. And when I reclaim my throne, I will owe it to you, my champion.”

“No.” He shook his head, still smiling. “When you reclaim the throne, you will owe it to your own strength, Majesty. No one who saw you don dead men’s armor and cut the throats of those who opposed you would ever doubt that you had earned the right to rule.”

“Thank you, Michel. Fight well.” He bowed again and went a few paces away, rolling out his shoulders and stretching his arms.

Celene turned to see Briala and Felassan still there, waiting for her to say something. “Felassan,” she said, “Gaspard has agreed to an honorable duel, but when he first attacked me at Halamshiral, it was through treachery. We cannot trust him. His apostate, the girl Lienne, uses magic to help warriors or weaken their enemies.”

“Yes.” Felassan looked over to where Lienne was now tending Gaspard. “Creation magic. It’s a bit like her healing abilities.”

“Or like the ring you wear,” Briala said, “the one Lady Mantillon gave you.”

Her voice was strained. Celene realized that she must still be feeling her injuries. “Yes, I imagine the Black Fox ring uses a similar enchantment.” She spun the old ring on her finger.

“Actually…” Felassan started, then shrugged. “Fine, somewhat similar. However, her skill with hexes—weakening her opponents—is what you *should* be worried about. She’s quite skilled.”

“If she tries it,” Celene asked, “can you stop her?”

Felassan nodded. “I believe so.” He cocked his head, looking at Celene curiously. “If I had the power to bolster Michel, or hex Gaspard, would you wish it of me?”

“Michel has said that he can defeat Gaspard,” Celene said. “We will respect his confidence.” Felassan smiled slightly and nodded, then walked off.

Then Celene and Briala were alone. She held out a hand, and after a moment’s hesitation, Briala took it and sat down. Her armor hung from her, shredded by the monster’s attack, and her shirt was torn and bloody underneath it.

“When that thing…” Celene broke off. “I almost lost you.” She could still see the beast standing over her, poised to strike. She could still see Briala firing, defiant in the face of the great monster’s rage, while Celene, heart pounding, could only stand and watch, unable to help without risking the varterral falling back upon her.

Briala’s hand tightened on Celene’s, though she didn’t look over. “And yet, here I am.”

“We are almost there, my love,” Celene whispered. She drew out the keystone the demon had given her, the ruby the size of a child’s fist, and held it for a moment. “Once Gaspard is dead, we will have the eluvians. With them, we will have Orlais. And with that,” she finished, “we will bring your people into a new life.” However long that took, for the elves’ own safety as well as the empire’s.

Briala looked down, and a tear fell from her eye. “You would give me that amazing gift.” Her fingers, still twined through Celene’s, toyed with the ring on Celene’s hand. “Gifts … when did Lady Mantillon give you this one?”

Celene pulled her hand free. She tucked the keystone ruby into a pouch at her waist, then held up her hand and looked at the puzzle ring, intricate twining shapes she could never quite follow. “You know, I am not certain I remember. It was after my father died, and I was alone. She must have felt

sorry for me, an orphan in the court. Yes, I recall now. She said it would help me keep my wits about me, that I might need them."

It was a bittersweet story. In another life, it might even have been true.

Briala nodded, and another tear fell, sparkling for a moment on the blue drakeskin armor on her leg. "Of course." She looked up at Celene, and though her eyes were wet, she smiled. "I never thought you lost your wits. It was one of the reasons I always loved you."

She leaned over, and with surprising force, pulled Celene into a kiss. Her soft lips were urgent this time, her breath hot as Briala traced kisses down Celene's jaw and throat. Briala's strong arms wrapped around Celene, pulling her closer as Celene returned the kiss, and her hands gripped Celene tight, cradling Celene's neck and waist.

"I will never forget this," Briala whispered, and then she pulled away. "I must return something to Gaspard."

She stood, her hands self-consciously tugging at her ruined armor now, and walked off, still limping and exhausted from the fight.

Celene went to Michel a moment later. "Are you ready?"

"I am, Empress." He seemed stronger, relaxed again, and his breath was even, though his armor was still dented and scored with acid. Celene hoped that Gaspard's had fared no better.

"Then take these." She held up both of her rings. "Your duel with Gaspard allows the best in weapons and enchanted items. There is no dishonor in fighting with everything you can bring to bear."

After a moment's hesitation, Michel nodded. "We are certainly not using training blades," he said, holding his fine silverite longsword up and giving it a quick spin. He slid the ruby ring onto his smallest finger, and flames immediately danced along the length of his blade. He put Lady Mantillon's gift ring on his other hand, blinking and testing its weight.

Then he picked up his shield, battered and scored as it was. "Thank you, Empress. I am ready."

"You are a chevalier, Ser Michel, and you are my champion. Win this for me."

She turned to Gaspard, ready for the duel that would decide the fate of Orlais.

* * *

By mutual agreement, Michel and Gaspard chose to start their duel far from where they had fought the varterral. The shattered rubble would have made for treacherous footing, and neither Michel nor Gaspard wished for this duel to be decided by something so ignominious as slipping on a rock.

Down near the bottom of the great bowl of the hall, the twisting runes of the labyrinth covered most of the flat area. However, between the outer edge of the circle of runes and the first row of marble benches was an open area about ten paces wide. It sloped slightly toward the labyrinth, Michel noted, testing his footing, but not so much as to affect his fighting style.

The benches were on his left. The edge of the rune circle was on his right. Just in front of the rune circle stood the rest of their group: Lienne and Mihris, Celene and Briala, and Felassan a little apart from them all.

Before him stood Grand Duke Gaspard. His shield, like Michel's, was still scored with acid, and his armor bore traces of the scratch he'd tried so hard to buff out. The scratch could catch a blade, if Michel aimed it just right, and Michel's blows would catch on the shield a bit more easily instead of glancing off.

He had fought chevaliers before, in both honorable duels and battles against those who incurred Celene's displeasure. They had been the most difficult fights of his career—until he had come down into these elven ruins, anyway—but they had also been the simplest.

They had all trained at the Academie. They knew the same drills, the same techniques, had studied the same lessons. There were no surprises. The battle was won by the man who had trained harder.

And that man had always been Michel.

Michel drew his blade, and flames flickered and flowed across its length. Gaspard noted the flames and smiled as he drew his own blade. "Death before dishonor, Ser Michel."

“Death before dishonor, Ser Gaspard.” Here, and only here, did the rank of chevalier matter more than any other title.

They saluted.

Then they moved.

Gaspard moved in with his shield high. Michel battered it with a blow, then back-stepped as Gaspard’s blade slid in for a low stab. Slamming his shield down on the blade, he knocked it clear, lunged in with his shoulder to knock Gaspard’s shield out of position, and thrust high.

Gaspard was a hair faster, and the flames of Michel’s blade just licked the feathers on Gaspard’s helmet as the grand duke slid away.

Shields clashing, they came together and broke apart, circling.

Gaspard grinned, the gesture twisting his mustache, and came in with a high backhanded slash that Michel flicked away with an easy parry. A moment later, Gaspard slashed again, and even as Michel moved to parry, he saw the feint coming and turned instead, bringing the whole of his shield against the sudden reversal and low thrust that would have skewered his leg. Gaspard’s shield slammed into his side, but Michel ignored it and threw a low kick that caught Gaspard in the back of the knee.

“Damn.” As the grand duke slipped, Michel spun away, stepped, pivoted, and turned with a backhanded blow that carried the full weight of his body behind it. Gaspard got his shield up, but the flaming blade sheared through the acid-weakened metal and chopped into Gaspard’s breastplate, just below the shoulder.

“Hah. Should have expected that.” The grand duke stumbled back, wincing, and slashed his blade through a quick spin to keep Michel from following up. He ended it with a grimace and a quick nod, then saluted again. “You are a worthy champion.”

Michel rarely talked during fights. He’d always found it distracting and thought those who did were either fools trying to bolster their confidence or cunning men using their words as one more weapon.

Gaspard came in again, swinging hard. Michel took it on the shield, and Gaspard closed before Michel could counter. Their shields locked, and

Gaspard stepped in close and brought his heel down on Michel's foot, following with a hard shove.

Many trainees at the Academie had ended up on their backs in the dirt after such a move, a blade at their throats. Michel dropped to one knee, letting the push slide over him, and stabbed high. Again, metal screeched as his flaming blade tore through Gaspard's armor, this time chopping half of the grand duke's pauldron free.

Michel was certain he'd given Gaspard a disabling wound, if not a mortal one, and the grand duke stumbled back.

In an instant, Michel realized he had misjudged the grand duke. While some few lords did the bare minimum of training and forgot their lessons after earning the yellow feather of the chevaliers, Michel had been certain Gaspard had stayed in peak fighting shape. Perhaps he was unaccustomed to the rigors of long battles, or perhaps he had relied too much on his fine armor. Either way, the duel was over.

Michel stood, ready to deliver the merciful blow to end it.

And in that instant, Gaspard's stumble turned into a spin, and the grand duke's booted foot slammed into Michel's breastplate.

Michel got his shield up even as he staggered back, and the follow-up blow glanced away. But even as Michel watched for what he had been certain was going to be a charge, the blow he'd set himself to block with his shield slid to the side and up under his guard. With a delicate hooking motion, Gaspard sliced neatly through the cuisse and into Michel's thigh.

Or perhaps he had judged Gaspard correctly after all.

He was still stumbling, and the hot knife of pain across his leg nearly sent him to the ground. He set himself hard and chopped down, but Gaspard had already sidestepped the blow. With a grunt of effort, the grand duke rammed the jagged, still-smoldering upper edge of his shield into Michel's visor.

Blinding pain seared Michel's eyes, and he dove away on instinct, even as another blow chopped past his shield and bit through his breastplate. It hit just above the thigh, where the Dalish warrior captain had pierced his

armor with a lucky stab, and Michel fell back, only to feel the crushing power of another kick smashing into his breastplate as he went down.

Michel's armor creaked as his back slammed into something hard. One of the marble benches. He'd gotten disoriented and lost his mental map of the battlefield, a mistake that would have gotten him flogged back in training. He forced his eyes open, blinking hard at the heat and pain that put a veil of red over everything. He could still see. The visor had taken most of the blow. He saw Gaspard moving in for the kill.

He got his shield up, turned the blow, and took another kick to the breastplate instead, a crushing blow that drove the breath from his lungs. The next blow battered his shield aside, and he rolled with it as the follow-up strike tore a chunk from the marble bench he'd been leaning against.

Through vision blurred with pain, Michel saw Gaspard.

The grand duke was grinning again, confident of his victory, and Michel could not disagree with the man's assessment.

* * *

Briala watched as the fight turned. Michel had seemed to have the upper hand, but then every attack he made went harmlessly wide, while Gaspard connected with blow after brutal blow.

She had seen battles turn before. She had watched duelists lure their opponents in with masterful feints and suggestions of weakness. She had seen warriors on the verge of defeat stand and take their enemies by surprise with one last stunning burst of strength.

This was different.

Michel struggled back to his feet, taking another slash that glanced off his armor as he did. He parried desperately, his armor throwing sparks as Gaspard battered him with blow after blow.

Beside Briala, Celene clenched her fists. Her breathing had sharpened.

On the other side, Mihris and Lienne were quiet.

That was when Briala knew.

She turned and stepped beside them. “Stop,” she said, not raising her voice.

“Stop what?” Mihris said, not looking at her.

“You’re hexing Michel,” Briala said to Lienne, who smiled but said nothing. To Mihris, she said, “And you’re hiding it, masking the glow that usually forms around the magic.”

“What?” Celene turned, and when she saw Lienne’s smile, called to Gaspard, “Gaspard! Stop this at once!”

Gaspard and Michel locked blades, and Gaspard flung Michel back, slamming Celene’s champion hard into one of the benches again.

“They can’t hear you,” Mihris said.

“The grand duke will, as far as he knows, win his fight fairly,” Lienne added, still smiling. “And when you protest, he will think you a woman without honor who cannot accept defeat.”

“Felassan,” Celene said, “put them down.”

Felassan’s lip twitched, but even as he raised his staff, Mihris raised hers. The head glowed a sooty red. “Are you certain that’s a good idea?” she asked. The tattoos on her face twisted as she smiled. “I’ve been flooding this whole area with ambient energy to mask Lienne’s hex. If you used your little purging trick, the resulting explosion would do a great deal of damage to the Veil. Who knows what might come through this time?”

“*You* know,” Briala said, “since that’s where you’re from, isn’t it?”

Mihris smirked and said nothing. Lienne kept her staff up, dividing her attention between Briala, who was closest, and Gaspard and Michel.

The noble girl, Briala thought. Gifted but untrained, saved from the Circle by indulgent parents, unused to a hard hike or any other kind of labor. She was the point of weakness. She was the place to start.

“What gave it away for you, *da’len*?” Felassan asked behind her.

“Gave *what* away?” Celene asked.

Michel swung hard, but his blow glanced harmlessly off Gaspard’s shield. Gaspard’s counterstrike screeched as it tore away armor and cut into Michel’s side.

“A hundred little things,” Briala said. “At the camp, Mihris was a healer, but gave no sign of being a truly gifted mage—certainly not gifted enough to change the magic in her staff. It was white before, wasn’t it?”

Lienne looked at Mihris’s glowing red staff, because after a question like that one’s natural inclination was to look, even during a moment of stress. Her attention left Briala, just for a moment. Just as Briala had planned.

Briala took one more step with an easy grace that didn’t draw the eye, and then slid her dagger smoothly into Lienne’s stomach.

The young noblewoman gasped, and her face went deathly pale as she staggered.

“You’re quite a healer, Lienne.” As the noble girl fell, Briala caught her and eased her to the ground. “I’m certain you can heal yourself, if you try. But do you think you can heal yourself *and* hex Ser Michel at the same time?”

Lienne shot her a venomous look, panting through the pain. “I … will see … you dead … you *knife-eared bitch*.”

It was a noble’s threat. Briala remembered Lienne’s mother, Lady Montsimmard, complaining about the food until the chatelaine threatened the servants with a whipping. That was probably where Lienne had learned it. Talk loudly, threaten the servants, and make it clear that you can do whatever you want to them with no repercussions.

But they were not in Val Royeaux.

“Will you? Then I’d be a fool to show you any mercy, wouldn’t I?” Briala asked, and slit her throat.

It had been for the duel, yes, but a part of her laughed as the knife slid across the skin, the same part that had watched Lady Mantillon die and found some justice in the world.

Among the marble benches, Gaspard’s blade came down, but this time, Michel’s shield caught it cleanly, and Michel’s blade came up and struck a glancing blow off Gaspard’s helmet. The grand duke staggered back, and Michel rose, bloodied but alive, and once again fighting with his full strength.

“I will see Michel dead.” Mihris raised her staff.

“That would be your choice,” Briala said, “*Imshael*.”

Mihris paused, and Celene gave Briala an incredulous look. Felassan nodded.

“As I was saying,” Briala went on as if she hadn’t just murdered a noblewoman, her mind so amazingly calm that her thoughts felt like pieces of crystal sliding into place in some great dwarven puzzle, “your grasp of magic has increased, and you speak about it with far more knowledge than a simple Dalish healer would have. And right now, you’re clouding Michel’s and Gaspard’s minds to prevent them from seeing us, just like the demon did to tempt Michel out to the circle in the first place. All of it made me wonder why Imshael would spare one Dalish girl, if, as you said, the rest of your clan had been slain.”

“Because she made a choice,” Felassan said. “She wanted revenge against Michel for unleashing Imshael upon her clan, and she was willing to allow herself to be possessed to make it possible.”

Celene looked at Mihris in disgust. “Possessed by a demon?”

“Spirit,” Mihris corrected, and then caught herself and chuckled. When she spoke again, her voice had deepened to that of the man who’d stood in the circle. “Ah, pity. You’re a bit more cunning than you look. Yes, Empress, I offered young Mihris here a little additional power in exchange for getting to come along.” The thing inside Mihris smiled. “None of which explains why I shouldn’t just kill bold Ser Michel now to fulfill my end of the bargain.”

Michel and Gaspard were clashing again in earnest, blades ringing with the uneven pattern of two master warriors, but Briala ignored it. Michel’s life and her plan hinged on her thinking very quickly.

“You could have killed him before, after we first fought. You didn’t. Why?”

“Because Mihris has to *choose* it,” Felassan answered, as the demon turned to him with a curious smile. “It let Mihris have the choice to attack,

knowing we would kill her, or stand down and abide by the truce. She *chose* to abide."

"Then she made her choice," Briala said, looking at Imshael. "And your end of the bargain is fulfilled."

The demon shrugged. "Possibly, love. But if you and your pretty empress gain the eluvians, what does it matter? All I want is a world to explore and desperate, motivated people to play with. What can your empire give me that Gaspard's cannot?"

"I will free the elves," Celene said. "Think of the chaos, the opportunity. The balance of power—"

"Will be carefully managed, just as always." The demon gave Celene a knowing look. "You will free the elves when you are ready, when it is *safe*. You offer me a stately dinner," he said, waving Mihris's staff idly, "when what I *want* is the ravening, bare-fisted gluttony of a starving man. The elves, the templars and the mages … they might kill a few thousand people, but that's just fire and swords. Fire and swords are *dull*." His eyes glittered. "There are so many more things in this wonderful world, so many more ways to mark the measure of a man."

"I will not allow you to endanger my empire," Celene said, her voice cold. "If letting you walk free put my people's lives in such jeopardy, I would throw myself upon Gaspard's blade."

Imshael looked at her in surprise. "You actually would, wouldn't you? And here I thought you prized nothing more than your throne."

"You know, you've got a good point," Felassan said. "Fire and swords *are* dull. But what if something bigger was coming?"

"I'm listening, Slow Arrow," said the demon. "What could you *possibly* do that you and I have not seen a hundred times before while the sweaty mortals lusted and grappled and bled their lives away?"

Felassan said nothing, just smiled, twisting the tattoos around his face.

"Oh, my," Imshael breathed. "Is that a promise?"

"Well, I was *going* for more of a threat."

Imshael turned to Celene, who stared at him uncertainly. “Empress,” he said, “best of luck to you. I do believe you’re going to need it. Whatever happens, I believe that Orlais is going to be quite exciting for the next little while.”

Then light flared around Mihris, and she fell to her knees, her staff flickering back to icy white. For a moment, a smoky shape flickered around Mihris, a haze that clung to her body, and then it was shooting across the room through one of the mirrors on the wall. The mirror flared brilliant red, then darkened back to the inert dullness of its dormant state, and the demon was gone.

Gaspard and Michel broke apart, and both men spared Lienne and Mihris a glance. Then, wordlessly, they returned to their battle.

Briala looked at the labyrinth of runes. The pattern was complex, but while Celene and Michel claimed not to be able to see it, it made perfect sense to Briala’s eyes.

Then she looked at Celene, who gave her a grateful nod before turning back to watch the duel.

And finally, she looked at Felassan, who had told her the story of Fen’Harel tied to the tree.

* * *

“Thought I had you there for a moment,” Gaspard panted as he and Michel broke apart.

Michel made no reply. Gaspard had nearly gotten him with his words before.

His thigh was bleeding, a hot and steady pain, and he could feel the slow drip of blood pooling under his armor. His eyes still burned from Gaspard’s desperate trick with the shield, and the wounds to his side and just above his hip would slow him down before long. His arms ached, and his lungs stabbed with each breath. He hoped it was simple fatigue and not a cut that had gone deeper than he thought.

He damned his carelessness. He had not felt so sloppy since his first days at the Academie. Then, every drill was a threat, every exercise a risk of betraying himself as a pretender, a commoner.

A fraud.

Gaspard came in, and instead of just holding firm, Michel met the charge. The jangling crash of armor rattled them both, but Michel kept his footing and his leverage, got an arm up to knock Gaspard's awkward short thrust aside with his vambrace, and slammed the hilt of his blade into Gaspard's visor. The grand duke stumbled back, and Michel started an overhand blow, then smashed Gaspard with his shield and sent him crashing into one of the benches.

He had compensated for his fear at the Academie with anger. He had lost his temper during practice, fought hard and passionately, and picked fights with the other students. His instructors had seen the anger as the cover it was, and assumed he was frightened of failing. Over years, they had honed him into a fine weapon, forging that aggression into a disciplined fighting fury that had carried him through every battle he had been in.

Gaspard stepped onto the bench and looked down at Michel. "Coming, Ser Michel?"

Michel wasn't foolish enough to charge a man on higher ground, but if he waited, his wounds would take him down in minutes at most. And Gaspard, the bastard, knew it.

Michel stepped up onto a bench himself, then leaped from it to the next one. Grinning, Gaspard matched him, leaping from bench to bench to close with Michel.

The benches were just a pace apart, close enough to fight from. They crossed blades, careful now, checking their balance and measuring each strike. Gaspard leaped to another bench, and Michel jumped over as well, and again they slashed, parried, blocked, and gauged each other's strength.

Michel saw Gaspard move to leap again, leaped as well, and realized mid-air that Gaspard had faked his jump, and was waiting to strike as Michel landed. With a twist, Michel wrenched his shield up, landed, and

immediately dropped from the bench and charged forward. Gaspard's blow clipped the top of Michel's battered shield, and then Michel plowed straight into Gaspard with all the weight of his body.

He had not been the human-blooded elf-brat on the street for more than a decade. He was Ser Michel de Chevin.

All that remained of that boy was the lingering fear of being helpless, of hiding in the trash and hoping that the chevaliers didn't find him on their rough adventures in the alienage, of watching every face in the market to make sure that none of them recognized the boy who had run away.

That, and the anger.

As Gaspard stumbled back, Michel came up with a fierce uppercut that tore Gaspard's shield out of position, then lashed out with a kick that blasted Gaspard from the bench.

The grand duke landed on his back on the ground and forced himself up, and Michel's flaming blade bit into his shield as Michel struck. Gaspard cut at Michel's leg, and Michel blocked it and came down with another overhead blow, this one angled past Gaspard's shield.

It caught Gaspard on the right shoulder, the one with the pauldron that had already been damaged, and this strike ripped away the rest of it and cut deep just past the collarbone. Gaspard shouted wordlessly and stumbled back, clutching his injured arm.

He was Ser Michel de Chevin, champion of Empress Celene. He breathed the words to himself as he leaped down from the bench and ran at Gaspard, who still staggered back.

He lashed out with his shield, battering Gaspard's shield out of guard, then thrust.

And Gaspard, not as injured as he seemed, leaped onto the bench and struck down with his shield as he landed, bringing the full weight of an armored chevalier to bear against the striking sword.

He had aimed perfectly at the tiny nick in Michel's blade, the minute imperfection that could spell the death of even the finest silverite blade.

Caught between the shield and the marble bench, Michel's blade snapped, metal shrieking as it tore apart.

Gaspard leaped down from the bench, his own blade raised, and Michel stabbed upward with the jagged remains of his broken sword.

He caught the long scratch that had marred Gaspard's breastplate, and the jagged silverite slid, then caught and ripped through.

Grand Duke Gaspard landed on Michel, and the two fell to the ground together, then rolled apart.

"Oh, Maker, I thought I had you again." Gaspard gasped the words, looking down at Michel's sword. Despite the broken blade, Michel had buried it almost to the hilt in Gaspard's side. "Caught that nick in your sword *perfectly*. Damned if you weren't noting my armor last night, just as I watched your sword."

Michel allowed himself to smile. "As one of the greatest chevaliers once told me, honor does not preclude tactics."

Gaspard forced a laugh, grimacing at the movement. "Why did you ever listen to that old fool?"

Michel got to his knees, pulled his blade free with an effort that made Gaspard groan, and stood over the grand duke.

He looked at the blade, then tossed it aside and recovered Gaspard's blade from where it had fallen. The grand duke deserved to die a clean death, and Michel doubted that the jagged remains of his own sword could deliver it.

Gaspard saw what he was doing, and nodded his thanks as Michel approached. With an effort, the grand duke rolled to his hands and knees, and then pushed himself up so that he knelt with his head held high. "Well fought, chevalier."

"And you, chevalier." Michel raised the blade.

"Ser Michel!" came a cry from behind him, and Michel turned.

It was Briala.

"I call upon your debt."

As the dread fear wrapped its cold hands around Michel's heart, Briala looked at him and nodded.

"Yield."

* * *

Celene felt the air go still around her as she turned to Briala.

"What are you doing?"

Briala didn't answer. She stared at Michel, who looked stricken, his flushed face going pale.

"Briala!" Celene grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing the elf to look at her, but it was no better. Briala's face was devoid of expression. She might as well have been dead. "Why?"

Beside them, as Celene's moment of victory slid sideways off the path and into the darkness, Felassan began to laugh.

Celene shoved Briala back, shaking her head to clear it. Whatever this was, whatever foolishness had taken her, Celene could deal with it later. She turned to Michel. "Michel, finish this!"

He stared at her, then back at Briala.

"You are my champion." But even as she said it, she knew it for a lie. If that were still true, he would already have struck. And his eyes would never have strayed to Briala.

"He is a chevalier," Briala said, and when Celene looked over, she was still looking at Michel. "Death before dishonor."

Gaspard, still on his knees, looked at Celene, then Briala, before turning back to Michel. "Michel?"

Michel stood stock-still, sword still raised.

"I *am* Ser Michel de Chevin," he said, finally. "But I am also the bastard son of an elven mother."

The sword clattered as it hit the ground. "I yield."

Universities whose libraries were filled to bursting. Restored roads busy with richly loaded wagons. Elves in the markets, smiling as they served the

greatest empire in the world. A cup of hot tea served every morning before sunrise. Small, strong fingers gently peeling the mask from her face.

Two words from her champion dashed a hundred dreams.

Celene spun at Briala, her daggers drawn. Briala stepped away, two steps carrying her out of range. She did not draw her own blades, but she was certainly looking at Celene now, and Celene cursed herself for a fool as she saw the anger in her lover's eyes.

"Why?" Celene gripped her blades so tightly that her fingers burned.

"Tell me again how you will free my people."

"I gave you my word!" Celene stepped forward, a dagger raised. "I swore!"

"And I think you even believed yourself." Briala swallowed. "But when the nobles protested, when it threatened to weaken the empire, you would have *let it go*. You would have ignored your promises to me, knowing that I would always forgive. That I would always stand at your side." Now her blades came out. "After all, I believed in you even after you killed my parents."

Celene waved it away. "That was Lady Mantillon! Whatever you think __"

"Gaspard!" Briala shouted. "When did Lady Mantillon give you your ring?"

Gaspard had sunk to his side, leaning against one of the benches. "After I'd proven my worth."

"And how did you do that?" Briala didn't look over. Her eyes were locked on Celene's.

Gaspard coughed. "I ordered a man's death as part of the Game."

Celene looked at Briala's anguished face, and remembered, as she did so often in those predawn hours of the morning, her meeting with Lady Mantillon.

"You have impressed me, Princess," Lady Mantillon said, her face hidden behind layers of makeup. "My own son believes that you are certain to

accept his suit should I support you. Comtess Jeannevere's son, coincidentally, believes that you will accept his *suit."*

It could have been a threat. Celene did not flinch. With a winsome smile, she said, "One cannot be held responsible for what young men think."

"Florian is failing," Lady Mantillon said, "but with all the efforts of the empire, he might live on for years yet, weak, ineffectual, allowing chaos to grow around him. If I introduced you to Marquis Etienne, could you keep your support intact until your uncle felt the hand of the Maker upon him?"

Another test. "If I could not," Celene said, still smiling, "you would not have extended this lovely invitation, Marquise Mantillon." After a heartbeat, gauging the noblewoman carefully, she added, "But for the good of the empire, it were best decided quickly."

She was sixteen years old, orphaned and alone in Val Royeaux, and she had just asked this woman to murder the emperor of Orlais.

"If we are discovered before we move," Lady Mantillon said, tapping an elegantly lacquered fingernail on the polished wooden arm of her chair, "we will fail, or we will be killed. Neither is acceptable."

"Then we must not be discovered," Celene said with a confidence she did not feel, and curtsied to Lady Mantillon. "Do what you must. I am ready."

"Are you?" Lady Mantillon asked, looking at her curiously. "How carefully have you moved? How circumspect have you been? Are there any who could, through bribery or threats or even trickery, betray your intentions?"

Celene thought. She had moved perfectly, using everything Lady Mantillon had taught her to position the pieces for this last gambit. All the other players, everyone she had trusted, stood to lose as much as she did if their plan failed. She remembered sipping wine with Lady Mantillon's son, drinking Antivan coffee with Lord Joseph Montbelliard, gauging each move, catching the subtle hints their bodies gave when they glanced at the passing servants.

The passing servants …

Celene swallowed.

"My estate is currently empty," she said, "save for the servants." She met Lady Mantillon's gaze. "An attack by would-be assassins might build more sympathy to my cause … and ensure that bards hear no tales in the marketplace."

Lady Mantillon looked at her for a long moment.

And then her perfectly made-up face broke into a slow smile. "I agree, your Imperial Majesty."

"If I had not ordered the servants killed, Bria, Lady Mantillon would never have backed me. Gaspard would have had me killed."

Briala nodded slowly. "As I thought. And so Gaspard wins the duel."

Still leaning against the bench, Gaspard laughed weakly. "I wouldn't have had you killed, Celene. Might have married you off to some Fereldan noble to get rid of you, though."

Daggers drawn, she advanced upon him. "You did not win this duel, Gaspard. You forfeited before…" She looked at Ser Michel, who did not meet her eyes. "… your opponent yielded, when your mages cheated to help you win."

"I'd wondered what happened to Lienne," Gaspard said, looking past Celene at the fallen girl.

"With her treachery, this duel is forfeit." Celene held her dagger out, ready to strike.

Gaspard snorted. "To forfeit, I would have had to approve such treachery. Which, on my honor as a chevalier, I did not."

"How convenient for you," Celene said, and attacked.

His mailed arm knocked her strike aside, and with a grunt of effort, Gaspard lunged up and threw an elbow that caught Celene in the gut and sent her stumbling back.

"I'm hurt, cousin. Not dead." He leaned on the bench, teeth clenched. "And you gave your champion all the pretty little rings you wear to cover the fact that you never had to learn to fight properly." He reached down to

his boot and came up holding a short-bladed dagger. It was ugly but practical, a wedge of steel Gaspard had likely kept as a weapon of last resort since his days at the Academie. “How do you like your odds?”

Celene spun her dagger. He’d caught her by surprise, and the blow had hurt, even muffled by her leather cuirass. “I like them well enough, Gaspard. Unfitting as such a job is for an empress, I will see you dead by my own hand, and then I will claim the eluvians and retake Orlais.”

“Briala?” Michel said, and Celene stepped back out of Gaspard’s reach and looked over her shoulder.

Briala was walking through the labyrinth of runes, her steps small and careful but sure as she made her way through the twisting pattern. She was already more than halfway through.

“But she can’t! She doesn’t have…”

Briala had seemed so forceful as she’d kissed her just a few minutes before. One hand had pressed tightly to the back of her neck, and the other had gripped Celene’s waist.

Celene’s hand went to the pouch at her waist where she’d kept the keystone ruby. It was empty.

Gaspard laughed. “She *is* dangerous.”

Celene turned and sprinted for Briala. She could see the ruby now, clutched in her hand. Briala was almost through the labyrinth. Celene raised a hand, leaped for her, and then fell back with a cry of pain as a jolt of energy flung her away. The runes at the edge of the labyrinth glowed angry red.

“Briala!”

She didn’t look over.

Celene raised her dagger, shifted it to a throwing position. “Bria. Please. Do not do this.”

Then a wave of frost snapped against her side, an icy numbness that was followed by a burning cold as Celene stumbled back, the dagger falling from nerveless fingers.

“I think,” said Mihris, rising to her feet with her staff ready for another blast, “that I am ready to choose again.”

Celene looked at her, then at Felassan, rubbing the feeling back into her arm.

“I was so worried about Gaspard,” she said, “that I never thought to concern myself with *you*.”

“Don’t feel bad,” he said. “Happens to the best of us.”

With no other gambit, no last stratagem, Celene could only look at Briala as she stepped to the pedestal. She placed the ruby on it, leaned in close, and whispered words that no one else could hear.

She lifted her head, met Celene’s stare, and as a wave of ruby-red light washed over the room, she said, “I claim these eluvians for the elves of Orlais.”

* * *

The wave of red light had awakened every eluvian in the room, at least for a moment. They were all dormant again, now, but Briala could sense the lingering energy in the air, the hum of power when she stepped close to them. They would awaken when she chose.

Gaspard and Michel looked at her as they bound their wounds, sneaking glances when they thought she wouldn’t notice. She ignored them. Mihris stared at her openly.

The magic had flowed through her as well in that moment, a thrill of cool wind that had raised the hair on her arms as she had stood over the pedestal. The eluvians were hers now, all of them, ready to take her and her people anywhere she chose. It would take time to explore, to deal with any possessed corpses or ancient traps that might endanger her people. But those threats could be managed.

And when that was done, she would have everything she needed to help her people.

“I would have freed them, Bria.”

Celene stood a few paces away. Mihris and Felassan leaned against the pedestals, not quite blocking Celene's path to Briala.

"So you say," Briala said. "But freedom is not given. It is won."

"It is both." Celene shook her head, wiping tears from her eyes. She seemed so much smaller now than she had in Val Royeaux. "Have you seen *nothing* in all the years you spent at my side? Change comes through careful planning, through compromise."

"You *compromised* my parents."

There were tears in Celene's eyes as she nodded, and without makeup or a mask, Briala could see the spots of red on Celene's cheeks. "I was sixteen, Bria. The Game had just killed my mother, and my father had just died avenging her. I would have been killed had I not proven myself worthy to Lady Mantillon. For all I knew, you would have all died with me!"

"And that was how you decided?" Briala asked, her voice even. "Sacrificing some to save the rest?" There was a time, she knew, when hearing Celene admit it would have broken her, stripping away everything Briala thought she knew about the world and her place in it. Now … it still hurt, of course, and Briala would shed tears later over it, for a long time to come. But she had endured worse pain in her life.

"I…" Celene looked away. "The blood of your family is on my hands. What does it matter how I came to my decision?"

Causes matter, Felassan had said. Briala knew that he was right, some of the time. But not now.

"You more than proved yourself to Lady Mantillon. She supported you even when I killed her," Briala said, and Celene started. "She could have taken me with her, but she stayed her hand. I always thought it was because she felt guilty about what she had done to my parents. But it was because I told her that I would serve you loyally. She saw that you had fooled me, and she did not wish, even to avenge her own death, to deprive you of a useful tool."

"You are not a tool, Bria."

“Not any longer.” The fear and excitement of the moment was starting to fade, and she felt the great yawning darkness inside her. She kept it at bay. She would not cry now.

“Michel and Gaspard are gone,” Felassan said. He stood by an eluvian, and as Briala looked at it, the mirror went dark.

Briala had offered them all safe passage. She could feel the eluvians now as she felt her own hands, and she directed Celene to a mirror that would take her away. It was whole, undamaged, and with a strange thrill, Briala could even feel the fresh air against it that meant Celene would not be walking to her death in a sunken crypt.

“Then it is your turn,” she said to Celene. “Where do you wish to go?”

“Val Royeaux.” Celene’s smile was bitter. “I have an empire to reclaim.”

Val Royeaux would be possible. Briala felt the pull of the magic through her, felt it twist to match her intention. But Val Royeaux would also put Celene in a position to end this war quickly and easily.

Briala was done helping Celene.

“Go, then,” she said, nodding to hide the implicit lie. “Fight for your university, your culture. I will fight for the others who have no one to champion their cause.”

Celene swallowed. “I will fight to save this empire, Bria. And I will take joy in my love finding her people, even as my breast aches with every heartbeat I live without you.”

Celene walked alone to the mirror, and with a quiet phrase, Briala awakened it.

“As does mine,” she whispered after Celene had disappeared.

Epilogue

Briala stepped out of the tunnel and into the light of the midmorning sun.

The ground was sheathed in white, and it caught the wan light and glinted. The first snows of winter had come in earnest while she had been down walking among the eluvians, and most of Orlais would be covered with snow by this point. Ahead of her, trees whose bare branches were draped with snow creaked in the breeze. Behind her, the plains stretched, gauzy white in the distance.

She was near the Dales, judging by the trees. She had come back here at Felassan's request, though she planned to make her way to Val Royeaux as soon as possible. She had work to do.

With the eluvians, she could move across Orlais faster than a chevalier on horseback. And that chevalier would never find her.

"It will be a hard winter," Mihris said from behind her, shivering. "If neither Gaspard nor Celene finishes this quickly, many people will die."

"Wars often have that effect," said Felassan as he came out into the light, squinting.

"I meant that they would starve," Mihris said sharply.

"And why would that matter to you?" Briala asked, turning to her. "Do you think the Dalish will suffer? Are you concerned for the other clans?"

"Always," Mihris said. She looked at the trees, and Briala knew that she was getting her bearings. Her clan had lived near here for years. Briala wondered whether Mihris intended to search for survivors, bury the dead, or simply leave. It didn't really matter. "As you are concerned for … your elves."

"My *flat-ears*, yes." Briala looked back at the tunnel entrance behind her. Even just a few paces away, it blended in perfectly, almost impossible to see unless you were looking for it. Nevertheless, she knew where it was, could sense it like a part of her own body thanks to the magic that still

hummed inside her. “I am *very* concerned for my people, Mihris. And for the first time, I have a way to help them.”

“If you gave the secret of the eluvians to the Dalish,” Mihris said, “we could—”

Briala laughed in her face, and the Dalish woman went silent.

“Every elf in those alienages thinks of you as creatures of legend,” she said to Mihris, “the elves who never surrendered when Halamshiral fell. They’re either terrified of you or inspired by you—you’re the elves who keep fighting, who have the old magic. They think you’re helping them out here, that you’re doing more than playing with demons and hunting for old relics, and if you *had* actually helped them, you’d have had an army of loyal elves ready to bring back Arlathan for you.” She smiled. “But you didn’t. You said that they weren’t really your people, and you left them to die. So *I* will help them. *I* will keep fighting.” She gestured at the entrance to the tunnel. “And *I* have the old magic.”

“I am not your enemy, Briala.” Mihris lowered her gaze. “I helped you.”

“I had something you wanted.” Briala kept smiling. “And your people *are* my people, even if they’ve forgotten it. I will work with the Dalish, but only if they help *all* our people. Pass that on to the next clan you meet.”

Mihris swallowed and nodded. She turned to Felassan. “Will you take me to your clan?”

“I don’t think you want to meet my clan, *da’len*,” Felassan said. “But good luck with whichever one will take you.”

“Whichever clan I join,” Mihris said, “it will not be one that deals with demons.” She walked off into the trees. Her staff glittered the same color as the fresh morning snow.

“Do you think I should have killed her?” Briala asked when the Dalish girl was lost in the trees.

Beside her, Felassan shrugged. “I suppose you’ll find out.” Briala chuckled, and he turned to her. “Are you sincere? You will use the paths of the eluvians to help your people?”

Briala thought for a moment. “Celene and Gaspard saw an army, but that would be fighting their fight. With the paths, I could get food to alienages where elves would otherwise starve. They would let me move ahead of an oncoming army and warn the target, or move behind them and attack their supply lines.”

“Which army are you going to hamstring?”

Briala looked over at Felassan, smiling, even as she started to shiver from the winter’s chill. “Whichever one seems to be winning. What was it? Anaris and Andruil?”

Felassan smiled. “You prolong their fight, and in the chaos, your people work free from their bonds?”

“It can work, I think.” Briala held her arms around her. “Halamshiral rioted because of a single nobleman. I can find elves who will help me with my work in every city in Orlais, and more who are too afraid to fight, but will serve as eyes and ears if I can help their children survive the winter.”

“That is,” Felassan said, and after a pause, finished, “a *unique* use of the ancient relics of our people, *da’len*.”

“I think Fen’Harel would have approved,” Briala said, and saw Felassan give a startled laugh.

“He might have,” her teacher said, “though I very much doubt it.”

“Oh, I almost forgot,” she said. “The passphrase to access the eluvians. In case we’re separated, it’s—”

She broke off as his fingers brushed her lips, looking at him in surprise.

Felassan smiled again, but his eyes were sad, and wiser than Briala could ever imagine. “Don’t.”

She looked at him silently for a moment, and then put it together. “You’re leaving.”

“I must.”

“The Dalish?”

He snorted. “Them? Please.” Then his face turned serious. “But the elves of Orlais are in good hands, it seems. Many other things are not, and I have more work to do elsewhere.”

She nodded, though her eyes stung. Begging him to stay would accomplish nothing, she knew. The protestations in the back of her mind—that she had more to learn, that she could not do this without him—she silenced before they gained a voice. The wisest man she had ever known trusted her to win her people's freedom. And to her surprise, she found that she didn't doubt his judgment.

"One last question, then, *hahren*. Was this…" She gestured at the tunnels; then at the woods where, somewhere a few days' journey away, Clan Virnehn lay dead; then to the north, where Halamshiral tilted toward the war that might set her people free. "Was this always your plan?"

He chuckled one last time. "No, *da'len*. You did this yourself." He leaned in and kissed her gently on the forehead. His lips burned like a brand, and her head spun for a moment.

When she opened her eyes again, she was alone, and though she looked in all directions, no tracks marked which way Felassan had gone.

Briala looked back at the tunnel. She was no longer shivering. Perhaps Felassan had left her some trace of his magic to guard her against the winter chill, or perhaps simply having a purpose warmed her.

She mouthed the passphrase, and the tunnel closed behind her, as if it had never existed.

"Fen'Harel enansal." The Dread Wolf's blessing.

She would make it count.

* * *

Wincing against the unnatural light, Celene took the last few steps on the path and stepped through the eluvian.

She had asked Briala to send her back to Val Royeaux. It had been her original goal, after all, back when she had a lover and a champion. Reach Orlais before Gaspard, make it clear that Gaspard's attack had failed, and then rally the full might of the Orlesian army and crush the rebels.

And it would have worked.

But Celene had seen Briala's face when the empress had made her request. She had seen in Briala's soulful eyes the little glint of calculation. She knew what she herself would have done in Briala's place.

And so she was not surprised when she stepped through the eluvian, blinked against the strange wave of energy, and found herself in a modest dining hall decorated with elven relics.

She had used the room for breakfast on occasion, since it had lovely windows that overlooked the gardens.

She was in her own Winter Palace just outside Halamshiral.

Celene sighed and shook her head. It could have been worse. Briala had at least been kind enough not to send her to her death in some long-abandoned tomb. She turned around and glared at the eluvian, and after a moment the crimson clouds marking its surface faded to dull blue-grey.

She had no champion, no army, and no master of spies. She was far from her seat of power, near a city Gaspard had likely conquered.

Her heart was broken, and she would cry about that later, she was sure. But perversely, some small part of her, deep in the darkest parts of her mind, was laughing. She felt like a girl of sixteen again, orphaned and alone in Val Royeaux … and the last time she had felt that way, she had won.

For a time, she suspected, she would have no trouble sleeping late in the mornings, even if she slept alone.

She closed her eyes, listened hard, and then crept from the dining hall into the corridor. She had grown up spending her winters in her family palace, and she knew the back hallways that kept her out of view.

A few moments later, she had reached her room. She picked up a silver bell by the nightstand, rang it loudly, and waited.

One of the palace servants, a stout and matronly human woman, entered in confusion, then stared in shock.

Celene, still wearing stolen armor, filthy and unmasked, simply waited.

After a breath, the woman dropped into a low curtsy. "Your Radiance."

The key, as in all things, would be confidence.

“I need a report on Halamshiral, a bath, and a strong cup of tea,” she said, and hid her smile as the servant rushed to obey.

She stripped down as the bath was drawn, ordering the armor burned. As she soaked and scrubbed, she listened to the palace’s ancient seneschal, a tall, thin man she had known since she was a baby, as he sat on the other side of a modesty screen and reported on Lord Pierre’s surrender to Gaspard, and his subsequent requests for the guards at the Winter Palace to surrender as well.

“Send a messenger to Halamshiral asking Lord Pierre to come here personally to discuss the surrender,” she said, and gestured wordlessly for her attendants to use more lavender-scented soap.

She had her first sip of tea while the servants pulled her into a corset and gown. The gown was deep purple, trimmed with the gold lions that were both her family’s symbol and the symbol of Orlais itself. The tea was hot, strong, and heavenly, and she drank deeply, sighed with pleasure, and then kept her face still so that an ancient elven handmaid could apply her makeup.

The servants announced Lord Pierre’s arrival just as Celene found her spare mask. She slid it on and felt a momentary strangeness at the sensation against her face, the tiny walls at the edge of her vision. It had been decades since she had gone so long without wearing it.

She waited at the top of the white spiral staircase, comfortably out of view, as Lord Pierre was announced. She heard Pierre walk in, along with the rattle of armor that must be from both her palace guards and his own troops. He greeted the seneschal with all the politeness of a proud Orlesian lord.

“I have come, as you requested,” he said, “and I am prepared to show every kindness to you and your staff. Rest assured, this is a difficult time for all of us, as I can attest from the state of Halamshiral itself, and it is no dishonor to surrender in the face of such force.”

As he started talking, Celene descended the stairs. She had timed it perfectly, courtesy of years of practice, and came into view from the entry

hall just as Lord Pierre finished speaking.

“I am pleased to hear you say such noble words, Lord Pierre,” Empress Celene of Orlais said as Lord Pierre stood there looking dumbfounded, “and while in darker times an emperor might have had his lord executed on the spot for such disloyalty, I find my heart moved by your speech.” She smiled as she reached the bottom of the stairs, and her palace guards stepped out to flank her. “And so I accept your surrender.”

Lord Pierre of Halamshiral was a good, kind man, but he had never been a strong one. He had not had the will to curb the elven rebellion himself, nor the courage to defy Gaspard, and neither of those things surprised Celene.

After a long moment, Lord Pierre dropped to one knee, and that did not surprise her, either. “Empress.”

Celene had been back for only a few hours, and she had already taken her first city.

* * *

Michel and Gaspard grunted as they stepped out of the tiny elven ruin where the eluvian had deposited them and back into the world of men. They stood on a windswept, snow-covered plain marked with a few scrubby trees. The sunset gave the snow a pale reddish tint that reminded Michel of the eluvian. He could have done without ever seeing that color again.

An icy wind cut through Michel’s thin cloak, and he shivered, but it was not full winter yet, and as a chevalier, he had had training in surviving in harsh conditions.

Though he was not a chevalier any longer, he supposed.

“Maker’s breath,” Gaspard said behind him, “I’ll take a little chill over those cursed paths.”

“Agreed, my lord.” Michel looked at the trees. “Do you have any idea where we are?”

Gaspard squinted, then laughed. “You don’t recognize it? If memory serves, we’re about a day’s ride from Val Chevin.”

Michel ducked his head, chagrined. “I have visited the city a few times, after Comte Brevin secured my title, but I am hardly familiar with the area.”

“Brevin?”

Michel supposed he should have left the noble’s name and reputation intact, but the man was dead. More than that, Michel was tired of the lies. “Yes, of Montfort. He saw me fighting in the street as a boy. He took me in to train me with his family guards, and then eventually had my title … found, I suppose. He said I had potential.”

“He wasn’t wrong,” Gaspard said, nodding. “Wouldn’t be the first.” He turned. “Tunnel closed right up behind us. Can’t even see where it was.”

“Some sort of magic, no doubt.” Michel didn’t look. In the cold air, his wounds were starting to ache.

They had kept a slow pace, both of them, and still they had come from the Dales to Val Chevin in just a few days, faster than even a messenger bird could have traveled. They had talked little, saving their strength and staying alert for threats that, as it turned out, had never come. At night, before they rested, they had rebound each other’s wounds.

“What a loss. Imagine if Emperor Drakon had known about the eluvians. How much farther could Orlais have spread?” Gaspard shook his head. “We’ll never know. Unless Celene’s elf decides to pick a side.”

Michel watched as the last sliver of sunlight slid down below the distant western horizon. “She isn’t Celene’s any longer, my lord.”

Gaspard laughed again. “That she isn’t. And neither are you, come to think of it.”

Michel turned to him. “So what happens now?”

“Damned if I know.” Gaspard turned from side to side, stretching, and winced. “That wound you gave me likely ended my fighting days. And that was *after* I broke your sword.”

“I meant what happens to me, my lord.”

Gaspard turned to Michel. “The Academie would strip your name from the rolls and order you executed.”

Michel nodded. He knew the rules as well as Gaspard did.

“Tell me something,” Gaspard said after a moment. “Why didn’t you just kill me?”

“I gave my word,” Michel said, and shook his head. It had seemed a matter of paramount importance to keep his secret back outside the warehouse in Val Royeaux. Had he known what the promise he had given would cost, would he have done anything differently?

“But why *keep* it?” Gaspard insisted. “You’re not really a chevalier, son.”

Michel reached for a sword that wasn’t there, then drew his dagger instead.

“If the chevaliers wish to strip my name from the rolls and kill me, that is their right,” he said, staring at Gaspard down the length of the blade. “But they will not take my honor. And I will not stand to have it insulted.”

“See?” said Gaspard, and smiled. “*That* is why I won’t report you to the Academie.”

Michel blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“Ser Michel.” Gaspard shook his head. “You beat me in a fair fight. You held to your honor even when it cost you everything. You’re the damned model for a chevalier, no matter what blood runs in your veins.” He looked behind them again, to where the tunnel had been. “Two hundred years ago, they’d have killed a woman for doing the same thing, and then along came Ser Aveline, and Freyan changed the rules.”

Michel had lowered his dagger as the grand duke spoke. He sheathed it now, speaking quietly as he did. “So you would let me remain a chevalier.”

“You *are* a chevalier. What you do with it is up to you.” Gaspard chuckled. “Now, I doubt you can still serve as Celene’s champion…”

“No, my lord.” Celene had made that abundantly clear. For his betrayal, his life was forfeit if she ever laid eyes on him again.

“And I won’t insult you by asking you to serve me.” Gaspard looked over, and Michel nodded in gratitude. “That said, we’re looking at fire and death for this empire. Me and Celene, the templars and the mages. Maker knows what Ferelden and Tevinter will do when they see Orlais weakened.

It’s going to get worse before it gets better. I went against Celene because I thought I was the man to guide Orlais through it…” He paused, then smiled faintly. “… and because I wanted the throne, if we’re being honest. But whatever happens, this empire is going to need men who care more about honor than about holding on to their titles.”

Michel swallowed. “Thank you, my lord.”

“Thank me by doing something good when it counts,” Gaspard said, and extended an arm. Michel clasped it.

The grand duke walked off toward Val Chevin, whistling a soldier’s marching tune. Michel watched him go, the grand duke’s form fading into the twilight, then stood awhile and looked at the stars.

He had no idea where he should go.

He had no armor, no horse, not even a sword to mark him as a chevalier. If anyone encountered him on the road, they would think him no more than a wandering peasant.

And he supposed they would be right. For the first time in years, Ser Michel had no great lie to protect, either.

There was only one debt he carried, now that he thought about it. It had been incurred in service to Celene, but Michel knew this one was his alone.

The demon Imshael walked the world now because of Michel’s actions. He could be anywhere in Orlais, anywhere in the world, really, but wherever he was, he was causing chaos and endangering innocent people.

Michel was neither a spy nor a tracker. Finding the demon might be the work of a lifetime, if it was possible at all.

But it was a purpose.

He picked a direction at random and started walking toward his new life.

* * *

In the darkness that night, the elf who had called himself *Felassan* made a fire in the deepest woods. He set wards around his camp, carefully marking a circle with energies that would awaken him if anything approached … because wandering bandits were *clearly* his biggest concern at the moment.

The thought made him laugh, and he dismissed the ward with a negligent wave of his hand. It always made the air smell funny, anyway.

He had caught a rabbit earlier in the day. He roasted it over the fire, taking his time and savoring the smoky meat. When he finished, he washed the juices from his face and hands with a bit of snow, then called the magic to himself to warm the chill away.

He looked at the fire, crackling and hissing from the wet wood. Smoke curled up through the trees until it was lost in a brilliant field of stars that dazzled the night sky like distant diamonds.

The thought of staying awake struck him. He had herbs that would keep him from dreaming most of the time, and wards that would do a good job of blocking him from the Fade when the herbs failed. He could have a lovely time, he thought, running and hiding and looking over one shoulder for the rest of his life.

But Ser Michel had held to his word, and Felassan could not stomach letting some headstrong boy show him up.

It was pointless to put it off any longer.

He reached into his robe and drew forth a packet of herbs. He sat cross-legged, calmed his breathing until he found his true self inside the shell of his flesh, and sprinkled the herbs over the fire.

The fire flared, going green for a few heartbeats, and the smell of the smoke changed to something sharp and old.

Felassan shut his eyes and dreamed.

He still sat in the forest before the campfire, but everything around him glowed faintly with the aura of the Fade, and the smell of the herbs was rich and fresh, as though he walked through a meadow in summer.

Behind him, dead leaves crackled as someone approached.

“I don’t have the passphrase,” Felassan said, not turning around. “Briala did not tell me.”

It was a lie, of sorts. She would have told him, had he not stopped her. And the figure behind him heard the lie and knew it as well.

“Yes, I know. She deserves a chance,” Felassan said. “And what’s the harm, really? Why not let the girl try?”

Behind him, there was only silence. There would be no debate, no logical argument or impassioned plea. Felassan had known that when he sat down before the campfire.

Felassan sighed. “I’m sorry. I will not take the eluvians from her.”

Dead leaves crackled again as the figure came closer behind him.

Felassan closed his eyes, straightened, and inhaled the rich scent one last time. “They’re stronger than you think, you know.” He smiled. “You know, I suspect you’ll hate this, but she reminds me of—”

He never heard the blow that killed him.

His last thought was for an elven girl, alone, with no magic, no family, no power, searching for her people.

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